1993

Disclosure Decisions and Patterns After a Near-Death Experience.

Regina M. Hoffman
Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

U·M·I

University Microfilms International
A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road. Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600

Order Number 9401534

Disclosure decisions and patterns after a near-death experience

Hoffman, Regina M., Ph.D.

The Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical Col., 1993

U·M·I

300 N. Zeeb Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

DISCLOSURE DECISIONS AND PATTERNS AFTER A NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Speech Communication

by
Regina M. Hoffman
B.A., University of Louisville, 1970
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1988
May 1993

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Completing a dissertation brings distinct joys. Among those delights is this opportunity to inscribe my gratitude.

The fifty individuals who discussed their near-death experiences with me made this study possible. I cherish the memory of our hours together. I thank them for their generosity and trust. It is my hope that within these pages my words have been faithful to theirs.

Dr. Kenneth Ring, international expert on near-death experiences, responded to my inquiries with interest and encouragement. I thank him for professional support that never wavered. I also thank those many individuals who assisted me in my efforts to locate near-death experiencers in southern Louisiana. I want to especially mention John Furr and Merilyn Zaitoon who helped in the early months of fieldwork.

To my Speech Communication professors, who challenged, guided, and cultivated my understanding of human communication, I extend my heartfelt gratitude. I give special thanks to my director, Dr. Donald Ragsdale, for his steady guidance in this long dissertation project. Under his professional direction, my interest in this topic came into research focus and found daylight. My thanks to Dr. Harold Mixon for his sincere interest in

this work from its beginning stages. To Dr. Andrew King, I express my gratitude for affiliations during these past six years that grew from teacher and mentor to colleague and treasured friend.

My professors in Anthropology midwifed this study through its earliest stages. I thank Dr. Walter Pitts, who recently died, for his enthusiasm about my original idea to interview a near-death experiencer for his class assignment. I also thank Dr. Jill Brody whose powerful insights into conversation and narrative opened my eyes to that original interview's riches. Dr. Miles Richardson, my minor professor and beloved teacher in ethnographic methodologies, motivated me to find my own voice and remain faithful to it. His humanity stirred me to stay grounded in my own in ways both magnificent and humble. I thank him most deeply.

I also remember fondly my fellow graduate students who made my academic passage stimulating and humane.

Working closely with numinous experiences has its peculiar psychological/spiritual dangers and rewards. It is my dear friend and colleague, Dr. Bennie Coates, who sustained me most nobly, generously, and intimately throughout this study. She knows, as few ever will, how this work has transformed my soul, my spirit, and my capacity for living. My deepest thanks to her for nourishing my wholeness so fiercely and so tenderly.

Long ago, my family of upbringing inspired me to work for my dreams. I thank my parents, Joe and LaVerne Doyle, for their loving support when resources were scarce as they cared for a family of nine children. I also thank two who were as a second set of loving parents to me during my early years: my grandmother, Evelyn McKune and my uncle, Reverend William McKune.

The teenage years of my chidren, Jenny, Beth, and Ryan, have been permeated with images of 'mom as student.' We formed a circle of assurance for one another as we each enfleshed our aspirations. My children offered wholesome perspective during the dry times, and I am grateful to them for their presence and their unbridled love for me.

I found the strength to weather (and honestly enjoy) the ups and downs of graduate study largely because my husband's love flowed steadily. Not knowing for sure where this journey would take us, Randy embraced me within the mystery of my work. Many days I borrowed from his store of courage and confidence. Thank you, Randy, with all my heart. Few women have been so richly blessed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

As a dimension of privacy regulation, self-disclosure is the means through which individuals manage the psychological boundary area between the inner, private world and the outer, public world of interaction with others. In communication research, a gap has been noted between self-disclosure as defined by scientific method and self-disclosure as it is experienced by people in their daily life. This study reduces that gap by investigating disclosure decisions about a major life experience through the thick perpectives of the individuals themselves. Disclosure is examined as a context-embedded communicative process.

To provide a thick description of disclosure decisions, an ethnographic methodology is used in this investigation. In-depth ethnographic interviews are the primary means for examining these disclosure decisions.

Recent work by psychoneuroimmunologists has provided important evidence that disclosure of traumatic experience benefits physiological and psychological well-being. This study examines self-disclosure decisions and patterns among persons who have encountered a near-death experience. A near-death experience (NDE) is the name given to extramundane events reported by individuals after they have revived from a life-threatening physical crisis.

Near-death experiences occur frequently and are known to produce profound and long-lasting effects. Gallup reported that 5% of American adults have had a near-death experience during a physical crisis. Substantial research had been conducted recently about this extraordinary happening, but little is known about subsequent disclosure decisions. For this research project, I located and interviewed 50 near-death experiencers from within the southern Louisiana region.

This study confirmed previous research regarding the powerful role of responses to early disclosures, the need to bring thoughts and feelings together to facilitate confrontation, and the essential role of listener response. New findings included an extended purview of decision variables and the distinction between decisions to initiate disclosure and decisions to respond with disclosure. This research also found that adjacent events can complicate disclosure decisions in ways not examined in communication research. Finally, in a discussion of secrecy I identified areas which have immediate consequences for disclosure processes and which merit further investigation.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Among the principal concepts in interpersonal communication research, self-disclosure has considerable status. Self-disclosure has been called both the means and an end of interpersonal relationships (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Towne, 1986). Because self-disclosure is both an individual, boundary-management process and an interpersonal activity, the topic finds a home in both psychological and sociological theoretical frameworks.

Research interest in self-disclosure began in earnest during the 1960s. Weiner (1983) traces the roots of that interest to existentialism. With its emphasis on alienation as a primary affliction of human beings, existentialism influenced psychological theory to investigate alienation and its remedies. Self-disclosure, as primary ingredient in meaningful relationships, became one possible antidote to alienation.

The psychologist Sidney Jourard, a pivotal researcher in this area, reports that he first became interested in self-disclosure in 1957 (Jourard & Landsman, 1980, p. 438). The first edition of The Transparent Self was published in 1964. As his research unfolded, Jourard wrote about the importance of self-disclosure for the healthy personality and about the connection between self-

disclosure patterns and health (1971). He speculated that withholding important information about the self constituted a form of stress which carried negative physiological, psychological, and relationship consequences.

In the years since the initial publication of Jourard's works, a number of researchers have attempted to understand the effect of self-disclosure in mediating mental and physical health. Psychoneuroimmunology has recently emerged as a research specialty in which psychologists and immunologists focus on the relationship between behavior patterns and immune function. Communication patterns (including self-disclosure) are often included as behaviors of research interest in psychoneuroimmunology. Jourard's speculations of twenty years ago are being supported through rigorous research in this new arena. For example, a group of researchers has demonstrated through a series of experiments that disclosure of traumas boosts the immune assays of healthy subjects (Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988; Pennebaker & Susman, 1988; Pennebaker, 1989, 1990). Pennebaker (1990) focuses specifically on the instrumental role language plays in assimilation and resolution of overwhelming experience.

As the body of research linking disclosure patterns with well-being has grown over the past decade,

investigations into the nature and conditions for disclosure have proceeded among communication researchers. Although persons disclose information about themselves intentionally and non-intentionally through nonverbal means such as physical presence, movement, eye contact, proximity, etc. (see Jourard, 1968; Derlega & Chaikin, 1977), self-disclosure in psychological and communication literature has come to mean intentional verbal disclosures about the self (Chelune, 1979). In this study, I will adopt the definition of self-disclosure most succinctly advanced by Petronio, Martin and Littlefield (1984): "the revealing of private information about the self." Communication researchers have offered several definitions for self-disclosure but this definition is the most closely aligned with its conventional use and with the understandings accepted by psychologists and immunologists in their attendant research.

This study is designed to investigate disclosures about a single, powerful experience. Through interviews with persons who have each encountered this happening, this study aims at understanding those subsequent disclosure decisions as they evolve over time. As an in-depth study of disclosure decisions from the individual's perspective, this investigation is distinguished from research in which disclosure is studied piecemeal, within

laboratory experiments, or through pencil and paper recall.

In addition, this investigation elaborates the process of disclosure. Rather than viewing disclosure as a unidimensional interpersonal activity with two mutually exclusive options (disclose or not disclose), this study examines a full range of cognitive and behavioral activities which surround disclosure decisions including disclosure desire, motives, aborted efforts, and subsequent evaluative reflections. Through an investigation which encompasses the full range of disclosure processes, this study aims at contributing to our understanding of the scope of major disclosure decisions.

This study examines self-disclosure decisions and patterns among persons who have encountered a near-death experience during a life-threatening physical crisis. A near-death experience (NDE) is the name given to extramundane events reported by individuals after they have revived from apparent death or from a physical crisis which brought them close to death. These reports include such descriptions as witnessing resuscitation efforts from a point outside the body, encountering a light of uncommon vitality and beauty, and visiting mystical or other-worldly realms.

I have chosen this particular experience for several reasons. First, it is impossible to investigate such an experience directly. Individual near-death experiencers are acutely aware that unless they disclose about their experience no one else can know about it. Substantial research into this extraordinary happening has been conducted over the past 15 years. This research depends completely on disclosure decisions and is subject to the faithfulness, completeness, and limitations of those disclosures. Within this research area, a collection of speculations about experiencers' disclosure habits is largely unexamined and sometimes contradictory. For instance, psychoanalysts Raft and Andresen (1986) wrote "as all students of this subject observe, people are inclined to be hesitant to talk to others about their near-death experience, for they fear being ridiculed" (p. 321). But Freeman (1985) noted that experiencers "really appreciated the opportunity to talk about their experiences with an open understanding person" (p. 359). Focused investigation is warranted to clarify disclosure issues within the field of near-death experience research.

A second reason for choosing this particular experience lies in the benefits this study may bring to the experiencers themselves and to those who assist those experiencers during subsequent adjustment. This happening, extraordinary and unexpected, is known to

produce profound and long-lasting effects (Ring, 1982, 1985; Sabom, 1982; Moody, 1988). Sabom (1982) summarized this impact with these words:

> Almost every subject interviewed in this study indicated, in his own way, that his NDE had been a truly remarkable and important event in his life. Some even described it as the 'peak' event, which had done more to shape the depth and direction of life goals and attitudes than any previous single experience. (pp. 124-125)

In view of recent findings linking disclosure with physiological well-being, persons who have an experience of this magnitude may want or need counsel. Professionals representing medical, psychological, and spiritual domains, as well as experiencers' family members and friends, need to be informed about the role they occupy if they are selected as targets for these disclosures.

Finally, when one considers the frequency with which the near-death experience occurs, the dearth of free discussion creates a state of isolation for the experiencers and a state of relative ignorance for non-experiencers. Gallup (1982) reported that among American adults, 5% have encountered a happening like this during a life-threatening episode. This ratio means that over 12 million American adults have had a near-death experience. Two independent studies have found that approximately 40% of persons who have survived a close-to-death crisis recall a near-death experience (Ring, 1982; Sabom, 1982). Another study found that children recall near-death

experiences following a brush with death at a rate of 66% (Morse, Conner, & Tyler, 1985). Still another study has suggested that listening to near-death experience accounts may play a role in reducing the listener's fear of death (Royse, 1985). Are those who have near-death experiences truly reticent, or do they wish to describe their experience but have difficulty locating interested listeners? Answers to these and related questions have implications not only for those who have near-death experiences and for those in close relationship with them, but for all persons for whom an encounter with death is inevitable.

This research project involves extensive personal interviews with 50 near-death experiencers in the southern Louisiana region. In all cases, the identities of individual experiencers are protected. Interviews are audiotape recorded.

The following three research questions guide this investigation about disclosure decisions, processes, and interactions regarding a near-death experience:

1) Whom do these persons talk with about their near-death experience?

2) What variables mediate the decision to disclose or not to disclose the nature of the near-death experience?

3) What variables govern the evaluation of the telling experience as satisfying or dissatisfying?

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE: PRIVACY REGULATION

Introduction

From primitive to modern societies, the regulation of privacy is a culturally pervasive process that involves political, sociological, and psychological spheres (Altman, 1977). Each human being experiences both an inner, private world and an outer, public one. While opportunities for physical and psychological privacy have increased in modern society, modern intrusions into the private realms have increased as well (Westin, 1967, p. 21). In political philosophy, the emphasis on individualism in the modern democratic state has given rise to a body of laws and writings concerning the nature of privacy and the relationship between individual privacy rights and the needs of the society at large.

As the individual manages the boundary between inner and outer worlds, he or she exercises privacy regulation. Human beings in the social world present themselves to others in terms of roles (Park, 1950; Goffman, 1959). The etymology of the word "person" derives originally from the name for "mask" (Park, 1950, p. 249). Thus, each individual selects those aspects of self that will be presented to others. In most circumstances, the individual alone governs those borders between inner and

outer worlds. Privacy is, therefore, a basic human province; the exercise of privacy regulation is a guaranteed freedom in democratic societies.

Westin (1967) lists four basic states of individual privacy in western democracies: solitude, intimacy, anonymity, and reserve (p. 31). In solitude, an individual is physically separated from the group and from observation. Intimacy is the state of privacy wherein individuals exercise the right to associate in close relationship with others of their choice. Anonymity occurs when the individual enjoys freedom from identification and surveillance while moving about in public places. The ability to publish ideas without identification is also included in the state of anonymity. The fourth state of privacy identified by Westin is reserve. Westin calls this the "most subtle state of privacy" (p. 32). Reserve is intrinsically psychological and involves "the creation of a psychological barrier against unwanted intrusion" (p. 32). Reserve involves a decision by an individual not to communicate that which could ordinarily only be known through personal revelation. A free society, Westin states, leaves the choice between reserve and disclosure to the individual, for the exercise of this freedom is "the core of the 'right of individual privacy'--the right of the individual to decide for himself, with only extraordinary exceptions

in the interests of society, when and on what terms his acts should be revealed to the general public" (p. 42). Jourard (1966) concurred with these notions in an article about the need for legal protection of privacy. Jourard writes that a free individual

> may conceal his experiencing if he wishes, thus leaving the meaning of his acts a mystery for others to conjecture about. He may choose the time and place for disclosure of his experience, as well as the company before whom such disclosures are made. (p. 307)

The exercise of privacy regulation rests squarely at the heart of both political and psychological theories of freedom. Rossiter (1958) defined privacy in an essay on civil liberty with these words:

> Privacy is a special kind of independence, which can be understood as an attempt to secure autonomy in at least a few personal and spiritual concerns, if necessary in defiance of all the pressures of modern society. It is an attempt, that is to say, to do more than maintain a posture of self-respecting independence toward other men; it seeks to erect an unbreachable wall of dignity and reserve against the entire world. The free man is the private man, the man who still keeps some of his thoughts and judgments entirely to himself, who feels no overriding compulsion to share everything of value with others, not even with those he loves and trusts. (p. 17)

Sociologists also discuss the tension between rights of individual privacy and rights of access to private information. Simmel (1950) writes that from the individual's point of view the tension between rights of privacy and the need to reveal is the tension between self-restraint and self-revelation (p. 326). Even in the

most intimate relationship, respect for "inner private property . . . allows the right to question to be limited by the right to secrecy" (p. 329). Again, the exercise of freedom forms the core of privacy regulation. Since individuals need both disclosure and privacy (Westin, 1967, p. 39) it is not a question of one extreme or the other. Rather, individual autonomy and social relationships require an ongoing process of privacy regulation.

Westin's four types of privacy represented an initial attempt to define and explore types of privacy. In psychological literature, privacy regulation research includes attempts to further define types of privacy. Pedersen (1979) determined types of privacy through a factor analysis of a self-report questionnaire. His findings correlated closely with Westin's categories, although Pedersen found support for six relatively independent kinds of privacy: reserve, anonymity, solitary, isolation, intimacy with family, and intimacy with friends (p. 1291). The categories of intimacy with family and intimacy with friends represent a differentiation between two kinds of intimacy and therefore expand Westin's more general category. Similarly, Pedersen found that "solitary" and "isolation" emerged as separate categories. Solitary refers to the kind of privacy one has when alone in a bedroom or study,

while isolation refers to the kind of privacy one experiences when alone in a remote area.

The type of privacy which is central to this study is reserve, wherein a person "withholds personal aspects of himself from others" (Pedersen, 1979, p. 1291). This category, which emerged in the works of both Westin and Pedersen, is inextricably linked with verbal communication. The content-focus of reserve is emphasized in Pedersen's later work (1988). Reserve is defined as "not disclosing personal information to others, especially strangers" (p. 597). Thus, the definition of reserve is the opposite of self-disclosure in denotation, since the latter involves the revelation of personal information to others. However, as Pedersen's definition implies, in discussions of reserve, researchers tend to focus on the habits of non-disclosure with strangers, while research into self-disclosure includes investigation of disclosure patterns with a range of others, from strangers to intimates.

Privacy fulfills many functions. Westin (1967) has listed four basic functions of privacy: personal autonomy, emotional release, self-evaluation, and limited and protected communication. Personal autonomy may be defined as "the desire to avoid being manipulated or dominated wholly by others" (p. 33). Because psychologists and sociologists have linked the human need for autonomy to

the development and maintenance of a sense of individuality (Westin, 1967; Laufer & Wolfe, 1977), privacy fulfills an absolutely essential need in psychological development. The need for emotional release arises from the stress of role-bound constraints and the high level of stimulation in social life. Similarly, public failures--both large and small--require a private healing time so the individual can cope with loss and regain psychic strength. A third function, self-evaluation, refers to the human need to "integrate his experiences into a meaningful pattern and to exert his individuality on events" (Westin, 1967, p. 36). There is a moral dimension to this function, since dialogue with conscience usually requires times of solitude and quiet. Still another fruitful product of self-evaluation is the contribution privacy makes to decisions of the proper time "to move from private reflection or intimate conversation to a more general publication of acts and thoughts" (p. 37). Finally, because privacy provides the opportunities for limited and protected communication, individuals are free to seek counsel in selected, protected relationships (e.g. attorneys, physicians, therapists) and also are free to choose whom they want to share confidences with.

Pedersen (1988) has added several other purposes that privacy serves. Most compelling, for this study, is the function of maintaining psychological boundaries between

self and others (p. 596). Without the freedom to exercise this right on a continual basis, the distinction between self and other would blur and possibly vanish altogether. Derlega and Chaikin (1977) argue that an individual "who maintains no boundary control with regard to self-disclosure outputs may have a less clearly defined self-concept than others just because he/she doesn't possess any scarce information" (p. 113). Describing the contributions that self-disclosure regulation (as one type of privacy regulation) make to personal identity, Derlega and Chaikin claim:

> Controlling self boundary adjustments may serve two positive functions in terms of defining personal identity: It contributes to a sense of autonomy and self-worth, and it contributes to the definition of the self by emphasizing one's uniqueness and individuality. (p. 113)

In this study, privacy regulation will be addressed as a matter of managing, creating, and defining the psychological boundary area between the inner, private world of the individual and the outer, public world of that same individual with others (which may range from intimates to strangers.)

The inner, private world consists of thoughts, feelings, and experiences which can only be known by others if and when the individual chooses to make those matters known. The communicative act of revealing private, inner experience is known as <u>self-disclosure</u>. By contrast, the decision to not disclose private, inner

experience is an act of self-concealment. Ranging between the two extremes of full disclosure of particular private information on the one hand (as in public disclosure through mass media and print), and complete concealment on the other, are degrees of relative disclosure. Just as individuals have the right to regulate these areas of privacy, they also have the labor of that ongoing regulation process. Before examining that regulation process more specifically with regard to a particular, private experience, it is necessary to explore the contributions that both concealment and disclosure make to individual well-being and interpersonal relationships.

Personal Secrets

Individualism stands out as a foundational value in western societies (Bensman & Lilienfeld, 1979) and is a major dimension of cultural variability (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Emphasis on the individual self is a historical phenomenon subject to fluctuations across time, across cultures, and across social classes. Regardless of the degree of emphasis on individuality, however, each human being experiences both an inner, private world and an outer, public one. The knowledge by an individual "that he was [is] a person apart, separate from his society and able to make independent judgments of both himself and his society" (Bensman & Lilienfeld, 1979, p. 29) creates the sense of individual identity.

Because psychological privacy regulation involves the exercise of personal freedom, personal privacy and openness with others are inextricably mixed together. When discussing privacy, especially in its psychological manifestations, it is essential to place privacy squarely in its instrumental role. As Westin (1967) notes,

> privacy is neither a self-sufficient state nor an end in itself, even for the hermit and the recluse. It is basically an instrument for achieving individual goals of self-realization. As such, it is only part of the individual's complex and shifting system of social needs, part of the way he adjusts his emotional mechanism to the barrage of personal and social stimuli that he encounters in daily life. Individuals have needs for disclosure and companionship every bit as important as their needs for privacy. (p. 39)

The development of individuality is "particularly important in democratic societies, since qualities of independent thought, diversity of views, and non-conformity are considered desirable traits for individuals" (Westin, 1967, p. 34). One of the fundamental requirements for the development of individual identity is the need for personal autonomy (Laufer & Wolfe, 1977). Autonomy is the state of self-government wherein the individual regulates her or his own personal matters, and the boundaries between private and public. Westin (1967) claims that privacy protects personal autonomy, a trait which is "vital to the development of individuality and consciousness of individual choice in life" (p. 34). The right to conceal personal information

is necessarily related to personal autonomy. Simmel (1950) writes that "the secret is the first-rate element of individualization" (p. 334).

The concept of secret is used in this psychological sense in this study. For the purposes of this investigation, a secret consists of private information about the self which the individual consciously withholds from another person, but whose content would be expected to be of interest or importance to that person. Essentially, a piece of personal information becomes a secret when it is judged to be of interest or importance to another person but a decision is made to conceal that information for reasons other than lack of opportunity. Conscious and deliberate concealment of information is generally recognized to be a key ingredient of secrecy (Bok, 1983; Tefft, 1980). Warren and Laslett (1977) state that "secrecy implies the concealment of something which is negatively valued" (p. 44). Within the boundaries of this study, however, I do not share that emphasis on the moral quality of the secret's content. Rather, the focus is on the individual's desire to protect or withhold personal information that would be of interest or importance to another.

Typically, though not necessarily, the reason for keeping information secret does involve an element of protection. Perhaps the information would prove

embarrassing, involves a moral issue, would lead to an undesired obligation, would create an opportunity for rejection or derision, or would invite pressures of social conformity. Westin (1967) describes this element of secrecy:

> Even in the most intimate relations, communication of self to others is always incomplete and is based on the need to hold back some parts of one's self as either too personal and sacred or too shameful and profane to express. (p. 32)

The protection provided through personal concealment and secrecy gives individuals a safe haven for sheltered experimentation (Westin, 1967, p. 34), for resistence of pressures to conform (Jourard, 1966, p. 314), and for creative ferment (Park & Burgess, 1969, p. 231). Pedersen (1988) states broadly that "to be psychologically well-adjusted it is necessary to achieve an optimal level of privacy" (p. 596). Jourard (1966) describes the inextricable relationship between privacy and personal development:

> One usually needs to leave other people behind in order to give up the way one has behaved in their presence. Being with people entails both a pledge to appear before the others as one has in the past (to practice the ways with which they are familiar and with which they can cope without strain to themselves) and pressure from the others to remain as one has been. . . . Other people--close relatives and friends especially--tend to invalidate new ways of being that are disclosed by someone whom they have long known. They invalidate the growing person because they are threatened by his new incarnations. (pp. 314-315.)

The need for privacy seems to be especially strong for those inner aspects of self whose foundations are new and fragile. Westin discusses the freedom to experiment which privacy grants to individuals for whom there are aspects of self which are not fully understood (1967, p. 33). The process of exploring and shaping those indistinct areas of self is a gradual one that often involves tentative moves followed by retreats and redirection.

Tournier (1963/1965) claims that personal secrets are "the indispensible instruments" of one's emerging awareness of self. In a child's psychological development, the ability to keep one's inner secrets creates the personal space where one can stand apart from one's parents (Tournier, 1963/1965, p. 8), and by extension, from society at large. This "standing apart" creates the conscious distinction between inner experience (private) and shared experience (public). Powerful feelings often accompany the child's first moment of withholding information from an inquiring adult. She or he may feel confused or guilty about this pivotal deed. The significance of the moment is not lost on the child, although the child may have only dim awareness of the consequences of the act. Quite vividly, the early decisions to encircle inner experience as one's private domain initiate the creative process of personhood.

Through these decisions, the child exercises new-found power. Secrecy always involves issues of power (Tournier, 1963/1965; Tefft, 1980). Derlega and Chaikin (1977), in a perspective that is similar to Tournier's comments, wrote that "it is possible that a sense of uniqueness (or individuality) may depend on control over boundary adjustments and ultimately keeping certain secrets" (p. 113).

The exercise of this power to create, maintain, and safeguard one's inner world continues throughout life. The inner world of the self is dynamic and ever-expanding. Each intrapsychic experience (thoughts, feelings, dreams, and intuitions) and each happening that occurs during alone-time belongs to the private world of the individual unless that person chooses to reveal it to another. Many of those private happenings and experiences may be of no importance or interest to others. Thus in this study, there is a vital distinction made between private information and secret information. Bok (1983) has elaborated on this distinction in her work.

Managing individual identity is both a necessary, ongoing process and an exercise in power. Decisions are made on a fairly regular basis about which private information holds interest or importance for another, and which important or interesting information one chooses to reveal and which to withhold. For adults as well as

children, a sense of distinct individual identity rests in part on an inner world, a world replete with personal secrets.

Although the need for self-protection through secrecy includes some rather obvious situations, such as withholding information from persons who might harm you, decisions of secrecy also involve more intricate and complex forms of self-protection. As a rule, communication researchers have not addressed the potential benefits that decisions of secrecy may accrue, although they have expounded the benefits of self-disclosure at great length. As Rawlins (1983) noted in a study of openness in friendship, communication scholars have emphasized the significance of self-disclosure and candor in interpersonal relationships since the 1960s. Yet, Rawlins found, "there is a continuous dialectical interplay between the expressive and protective functions of communication in such enduring bonds. . . Scholars should be cautious in stressing open communication as the hallmark of intimacy" (p. 13). Rawlins' work affirmed the need for restraint and selective disclosure in preserving friendships. The benefits of nondisclosure for individuals themselves are less well understood by communication researchers.

Various writers in other disciplines have investigated the connection between personal secrecy and

psychological health by identifying particular instances wherein a decision to keep a secret gave sustenance to individual well-being. As a bridge between communication research and these other disciplines, I present a brief summary of some particular cases. These few descriptions may shed light onto the kind of circumstances and experiences for which a response of secrecy may be nourishing to individual identity.

Carl Jung, psychiatrist and pioneer psychoanalyst in this century, described the positive impact a childhood secret had on his psychological development when he wrote his autobiography. The vitality of his inner world during early childhood, rich with imagination and experience, was threatened by his entry into the rough-and-tumble world of his rustic schoolmates. "I found that they alienated me from myself. When I was with them I became different from the way I was at home" (1961/1963, p. 19). As a method of keeping his inner world vital and safe, Jung carved a small manikin, hid the carved figure and other precious objects in the forbidden attic, and created rituals for periodic visits to the secret place. Discussing these acts in his later autobiography Jung states: "I contented myself with the feeling of newly won security, and was satisfied to possess something that no one knew and no one could get at. It was an inviolable secret which must never be betrayed" (p. 22). Later in the same book, Jung

describes in greater detail the essential role that this ability to keep an inviolate secret plays in the unfolding self-realization which Jung terms "individuation".

> The individual on his lonely path needs a secret which for various reasons he may not or cannot reveal. Such a secret reinforces him in the isolation of his individual aims. A great many individuals cannot bear this isolation. They are the neurotics, who necessarily play hide-and-seek with others as well as with themselves, without being able to take the game really seriously. . . . Only a secret which the individual cannot betray--one which he fears to give away, or which he cannot formulate in words, and which therefore seems to belong to the category of crazy ideas--can prevent the otherwise inevitable retrogression. (pp. 343-344)

It wasn't until much later in life that Jung discussed his great secrets with his wife (p. 41); one of his greatest secrets he kept to himself until he was sixty-five years of age. Paradoxically, the very secrets that nourished Jung's early development are publicly revealed later through his writings. Can the revelation of a deep secret be an act of nourishment for individuality as well? I will return to this focal question in the sections that follow.

In a similar vein, psychoanalyst and author Khan (1983) discusses the nourishing effects secrecy may produce under certain circumstances in a chapter entitled "Secret as Potential Space." To illustrate the potential contribution of secrecy, Khan describes how one of his clients took steps to protect a threatened aspect of her self. The client's close and nourishing relationship

with her mother came to an abrupt end when her mother gave premature birth to twins, became ill, and remained unable to care for any of her children for years. The client, who was 3 1/2 years of age at the time, stole two valuable candlesticks from the house and buried them in the garden. Khan believed that:

> the candlesticks symbolized all the good nourishing experiences of her infancy and early childhood. . . . There was a distinct precocity in her capacity to use such a self-protective manoeuvre at this early age. The burying of the candlesticks created a secret where she could continue in suspended animation a part of her that she could no longer live and share with her parents, especially the mother. The <u>secret</u> encapsulated her own <u>absent</u> self. (p. 103)

Another prominent psychoanalyst and writer, Singer, describes the value of withholding some kinds of personal information, at least for a time (1972). For example, Singer cautions:

> [Talking about a dream] prematurely to another person is to break the special relationship between the ego and the unconscious. . . . it is vitally important that the material be held in and contemplated, that the full feelings associated with it be experienced in all their strength and not dissipated in idle conversation. (pp. 319-320)

Singer has found that it is helpful that the client remain alone with the feelings and content of the dream a few days before the appointment with the analyst occurs. Thus the client may turn the dream "over in his thoughts to extract from it all he possibly can" (p. 320). Expressing a similar attitude toward powerful experience and treasured aspects of the self, Tournier (1963/1965)

writes, "a certain secrecy, to just the right extent, ought to enclose every precious thing, every precious experience, so that it can mature and bear fruit" (p. 19). A further tribute to the fruitfulness of secrecy for personal and creative development is given by MacIver (1952):

> I would like . . . to go beyond the notion of human dignity as a basis of certain types of privacy. Everything that grows first of all does so in the darkness before it sends its shoots out into the light. In other words, it is a creative stage, which is part of the privacy which means the integrity of individuals. (p. 139)

Some experiences appear to be so profound, so rich with inner meaning and reality, that linguistic structures prove to be inadequate means of expression. Ineffability does not correspond exactly to secrecy. However whenever an experience is--in its great and mysterious power--ineffable, individuals may chose secrecy rather than misrepresent the true nature of the experience through linguistic approximations. With respect to a particular kind of experience, mystical experience, ineffability and secrecy are intertwined. As Tournier (1963/1965) writes:

> Great mystics, those who penetrate most deeply into the secrets of God, speak of them prudently, reservedly, difficultly. The greatest secrets are inexpressible. At times, in the encounter with God, we have the impression of discovering life's secret, but we also sense it is incommunicable. It is a secret between God and us which must be respected reverently. (p. 62)

With regard to experiences of this nature, secrecy is a form of protection which would not necessarily represent

an unwillingness to disclose. Rather, this form of protection is a choice to reverence the inexpressible and an acknowledgement of linguistic limitation.

Secrecy, then, has the possibility to provide fertile ground which may nourish more than personal autonomy. Secrecy may also promote individual self-realization, sustain creative self-development, and embrace sacred experience. It seems reasonable to claim that secrecy requires an output of psychological energy, and perhaps physiological energy as well. The borders that are erected when the decision for secrecy is made must be guarded. Protection is a continuous process. Thus, the revelation of a secret is often accompanied by a cathartic relief as energy once dedicated to preservation of secrecy is freed for other uses. Perhaps during the protection phase, the energy dedicated to guarding the secret strengthens that which--because of its fragility--could not yet exist on its own.

The protection that secrecy provides also creates safety from unwanted intrusions, and a guarantee that the private information can not be used against the individual. Unwanted intrusions often arise from the inappropriate curiosity of others. The "propensity for curiosity [that] seems to be a universal trait" (Westin, 1967, pp. 54-55), and curiosity does fulfill some important social needs like circulating information and

promoting group norms. On a psychological level, curiosity about another's private experiences leads to connotations of voyeurism. Although a voyeur is technically a person who views the private sexual acts of others for purposes of gratification, inappropriate curiosity concerning the private experience of others could indicate a desire for vicarious experience, perhaps because one's own private experience is impoverished. The issue of power seems to play a potent role in inappropriate curiosity as well, since if secrecy is an exercise of power then discovery of another's secrets is also a form of power.

Westin (1967), building his discussion of areas of personal secrecy on the work of theorists such as Georg Simmel, R. E. Park, Kurt Lewin, and Erving Goffman, has described zones of secrecy (p. 33). Ultimate secrets are those "hopes, fears, and prayers that are beyond sharing with anyone" which reside in the innermost circle, the "sanctuary of the personality". Intimate secrets, the next circle, contains those matter which are willingly shared with close relations and confessors. The next circle would be open to member of the individual's friendship group, and onward until the outer cirlces encompass topics which are available for casual conversation to all. Westin claims that:

> most serious threat to the individual's autonomy is the possibility that someone may penetrate the inner

> zone and learn his ultimate secrets, either by physical or psychological means. This deliberate penetration of the individual's protective shell, his psychological armor, would leave him naked to ridicule and shame and would put him under the control of those who knew his secrets. Autonomy is also threatened by those who penetrate the core self because they do not recognize the importance of ultimate privacy or think that the casual and uninvited help they may be rendering compensates for the violation. (p. 33)

Just as keeping a personal secret can be an indispensible part of forming individual identity, so also choosing to reveal a personal secret to a trusted other is a necessary step in development. As Tournier (1963/1965) writes:

> If keeping a secret was the first step in the formation of the individual, telling it to a freely chosen confidant is going to constitute then the second step in the formation of the individual . . . Keeping a secret is an early assertion of freedom; telling it to someone that one chooses is going to be a later assertion of freedom, of even greater value. He who cannot keep a secret is not free. But he who can never reveal it is not free either. (p. 29)

The exercise of freedom and power are the twin components of decisions to keep or tell personal secrets. With this understanding in mind, one can look back at Jung's comments about the vital psychological nourishment he gained through his decision to keep a childhood secret, and also find it plausible that his later decision to reveal that secret may have been a nourishing act to his psyche as well. Westin (1967) states that:

> deciding when and to what extent to disclose facts about himself--and to put others in the position of receiving such confidences--is a matter of enormous

> concern in personal interaction, almost as important as whether to disclose at all. (p. 37)

How do individuals discern when it is the keeping of a secret which is the nourishing act toward self, and when it is the telling of a secret which is the nourishing act? This study attempts to uncover some of the answers to that question through inquiry about decisions of secrecy/ decisions of disclosure with respect to a particular, powerful, inner experience: the near-death experience.

In addition, this author hopes to bring a deeper appreciation for the healthiness of certain decisions for secrecy into the current understanding of disclosure benefits in communication research. As communication scholars, we must investigate disclosure decision processes with a balanced eye for the potential benefits of nondisclosure in certain cases, and disclosure in others.

Self-Disclosure

Western cultures hail individualism and give the "I" identity precedence over the "we" identity (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988, p. 40). This priority scheme is not without its particular psychological burdens. Managing the boundaries between private and public worlds requires skill, practice, insight, and energy. During the Victorian Age, the private realm of each individual belonged to that individual and God alone. Benson and

Lilienfeld (1979) describe some of the psychological consequences of this perspective:

> There was something indecent about revealing those aspects of the self that were either sinful or socially inappropriate. The individual had to conceal from others (and often from himself) those aspects of himself that were socially or morally stigmatic. This made individualism and privacy a burden difficult to bear. (pp. viii-ix)

As Western philosophers like Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber began to investigate the experiential world of the individual, the concept of self-disclosure emerged (Chelune, 1979, p. 2). Existentialism, with its emphasis on alienation as a primary affliction of the human condition, influenced psychological theory and further contributed to the increased priority given to self-disclosure (Weiner, 1983). Meaningful involvement and relationships with others became a principal antidote to alienation.

Self-disclosure is the act of making the inner self known to another. More specifically, self-disclosure involves the revelation of information about the self which is: verbally delivered, truthful, intentionally given to another, difficult or impossible to discover through other means, and risky (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Towne, 1986). The level of risk may vary greatly, but just as keeping personal secrets usually involves some motive of protection, so the decision to self-disclose involves a willingness to entail some level of personal risk. Self-

disclosure, then, is the means of managing the boundary areas between the inner and outer worlds of the individual (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977; Petronio, Martin, & Littlefield, 1984). As such, self-disclosure is a liminal activity. Acts of self-disclosure mark the emergence of personal secrets from the domain of the inner world into the domain of the public world. Once the information resides in the public world, even if this extends only to a single other person, the individual's control of the information ceases to be absolute. The delicate communicative act of self-disclosure always carries some level of psychological risk and identity adjustment.

Self-disclosure occupies a cornerstone position in communication theory. Although persons disclose information about themselves intentionally and non-intentionally through nonverbal means such as physical presence, movement, eye contact, proximity, etc., (see Jourard, 1968; Derlega & Chaikin, 1977), self-disclosure in psychological and communication literature has come to mean intentional verbal disclosures about the self (Chelune, 1979). The field of communication theory has always been closely associated with psychological research, and social psychology has made significant contributions to our understanding of communication processes. Because self-disclosure is both an individual, boundary-management process and an interpersonal activity,

the topic finds a home in both psychological and sociological theoretical frameworks. In the field of interpersonal communication, self-disclosure has been called both the means and the end of interpersonal relationship (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Towne, 1986).

No research figure has contributed more to the current prominence of self-disclosure in communication and psychological research than Sidney Jourard. Jourard, a clinical and experimental psychologist, began studying self-disclosure in 1957 (Jourard & Landsman, 1980, p. 438). He chose this subject because "I began to wonder what we knew about the conditions under which people would reveal personal information to others" (p. 438). While Jourard recognizes the constraints that some roles impose, he argues that a healthy personality requires that a person be fully known by at least one other person (1971).

As a practicing psychotherapist, Jourard drew insight from his clinical experience to direct and support his understanding of self-disclosure. Significant portions of his writings are devoted to a discussion of the behaviors of psychotherapists and other medical personnel which inhibit or facilitate self-disclosure for patients. He personally experienced the unsettling effects of having his own behavior become the object of 'scientific' attention by his students (1968). Jourard reported that the "technique" approach of the typical helping

professional depersonalizes the experience for the patient and inhibits self-disclosure. To mitigate this inhibiting effect, Jourard strongly suggested that helping professionals actively discover and reveal their own authentic experience in their relationship with the patient.

Historically, Jourard belongs to one trend in psychotherapy which advocates the use of therapist "self" within the treatment process. Two camps have formed within therapeutic circles, polarizing professionals into extreme ends of a continuum running from the "nude" position of exposing therapist self on the one hand, to the "neutral" position where a therapist remains virtually a blank screen, on the other (Weiner, 1983). As several authors have noted (Weiner, 1983; Mathews, 1989), each position holds dangers and benefits, and specific guidelines for therapists regarding their self-disclosure to clients do not exist. Because self-disclosure occurs between persons whose relationships may range from strangers to intimates, questions of timing, content, and effect of self-disclosure are embedded in complex relational processes.

Jourard speculated that the energy required to withhold information about the self translates into physiological stress. Because he observed that women typically disclose more than men, Jourard suggested that

the stress of withholding personal information may be a part of the reason why men have shorter life expectancies (1971).

Jourard augmented his clinical insights with experiments into the nature of self-disclosure. A compilation of self-disclosure research by Jourard and associates from the late 1950s to the early 1970s was published in the 1979 book: Self-Disclosure: An Experimental Analysis of the Transparent Self. Several questionnaires were developed and validated (like the Jourard Self-Disclosure Questionnaire), and some are still used by researchers today (Dattel & Neimeyer, 1990) even though there is reason to question the correlation between such self-report questionnaires and objective measures of self-disclosure (Weiner, 1983, p. 48).

Some researchers place self-disclosure explicitly in the realm of privacy regulation (see Derlega & Chaikin, 1977; Westin, 1967; Jourard, 1966; Pedersen, 1979, 1988) and discuss both decisions to disclose and decisions to withhold. Others examine only that end of the spectrum where the spotlight focuses on disclosure behavior and motives. Privacy regulation, however, is at least implicitly the underlying process behind all disclosure behavior. Derlega and Chaikin (1977) proposed that "reconceptualizing self-disclosure as a form of boundary adjustment in the maintenance of privacy may provide a

useful framework for integrating the self-disclosure literature" (p. 102).

Privacy regulation forms the rubric for this study. More specifically, the particular aspect of privacy regulation which governs this study is the regulation of the "self boundary". This psychological barrier around our individual self is based on nondisclosure and opened through disclosure (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). The default condition is nondisclosure; self-disclosure requires choice and interaction.

Researchers have approached the study of self-disclosure from many distinct directions and emphases. Included in these studies have been investigations of appropriateness (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974), reciprocity (Hosman & Tardy, 1980; Hill & Stull, 1982), trust (Wheeless, 1978), relationship (Tardy, Hosman, & Bradac, 1981), interpersonal situation (Brockhoeft, 1979), gender (Petronio, Martin, & Littlefield, 1984), and motives (Taylor, 1979; Rosenfeld & Kendrick, 1984). In addition, investigators from many fields have related self-disclosure to issues of marital adjustment (Waring, 1990), friendship satisfaction (Rawlins, 1983), psychosocial adjustment among cancer survivors (Fritz, Williams, & Amylon, 1988) and physiological health (Cumes, 1983; Pennebaker & Susman, 1988; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988; Pennebaker, 1989; Pennebaker, 1990). In

this section I will highlight the primary aspects of self-disclosure research in the fields of communication and psychology from the past few decades, before turning to a discussion of recent findings by psychoneuroimmunologists concerning self-disclosure and physiological health. My goal in this summary will not be to present an exhaustive review of disclosure research. Rather, I will present a review of disclosure research which illuminates the inquiry within this study to identify the variables that mediate the decision to disclose and those variables that govern the evaluation of the telling experience as satisfying or dissatisfying.

Methodological issues. Self-disclosure research has been diverse and fractionary, and it is necessary to highlight several methodological issues before summarizing research findings. Chelune (1979) has addressed these issues in self-disclosure research in a chapter entitled "Measuring Openness in Interpersonal Communication." Many of the conflicting results from studies in self-disclosure may be a consequence of researchers using differing definitions for self-disclosure. Few researchers state their definitions, and how self-disclosure in operationalized needs to be scrutinized in individual studies before the findings can be generalized.

Most early studies (1958-1965) in self-disclosure were designed to examine self-disclosure as a personality

"trait" (individual differences across social situation contexts). A shift to a "state" approach (investigating the conditions that influence self-disclosure across individuals) surfaced in the mid 1960s. More recently [during the 1970s], Chelune stated, self-disclosure has been seen as a complex human behavior which is multiply determined through an interaction of both personal and situational variables. For example, researchers now understand that individuals differ in the extent to which their social behavior is consistent (trait-like) or variable (trait-free) across social situations.

Chelune noted that self-disclosure includes, at a minimum, five basic parameters: 1) amount or breadth of personal information disclosed, 2) intimacy of information disclosed, 3) duration or rate of disclosure, 4) affective manner of presentation, and 5) self-disclosure flexibility. Many researchers investigate only a subset of these but make generalizations that act as if they embrace <u>all</u> dimensions of self-disclosure.

Another problem in self-disclosure research has come from the increased reliance on college-student subject pools, and pencil and paper methodologies. It is not an easy task for a researcher to "translate a phenomenological behavior such as self-disclosure into operational terms suitable for scientific research" (Chelune, 1979, p. 1). This problem is compounded when

the subject pool's representativeness is questionable [college students], when the subjects' motives [i.e. course credit] may detract from their performance, when data collection is unidimensional, or when measures of amount or intimacy of self-disclosure are not objectively controlled. For example, a number of writers have suggested that males have lower standards for intimacy than females in self-rated disclosures. Male subjects, then, may inflate their intimacy ratings yielding the [possibly] erroneous impression in some studies that males and females are equally intimate in disclosure (Prager, Fuller, & Gonzalez, 1989).

Scholars need to be aware of these and other methodological issues and carefully note research design features and limitations before expanding research findings beyond their reasonable boundaries. In addition, investigations which explore the phenomenological reality of self-disclosure are needed to offset the limitations of thin descriptions of this complex communication behavior.

Discloser. A number of studies linking disclosure patterns with personality traits have been attempted, but results have been disappointing thus far. Pedersen and Higbee (1969) reported in an early article that "this [study] demonstrates the difficulty of identifying personality correlates of self-disclosure" (p. 83). Chelune (1976), in analyzing the source of variance for a

self-report inventory about self-disclosing behavior, found that 14% of the variance was due to factors within the disclosing person. This source trailed behind the importance of target (34% of the variance) and setting conditions (15%). Efforts to link these personal factors to personality characteristics have been disappointing.

Brockhoeft (1979) investigated the relationship between self-disclosure and various aspects of personality/mental health in his dissertation. In his experiment, participants completed personality inventories before they were confronted with three interpersonal situations in which self-disclosure was required: warm/accepting, neutral, and cold/nonaccepting. Brockhoeft concluded that his study "provided additional evidence that a 'universal' trait-disclosure relationship between mental health and self-disclosure does not exist. Continued use of 'trait' oriented approaches to self-disclosure research is not likely to significantly add to our knowledge" (p. 76).

Chaikin and Derlega (1974) also reported that studies focusing on mental health and self-disclosure have produced conflicting and, ultimately, inconclusive results. In their study in which undergraduates read about the disclosure decisions and behaviors of individuals in specific situations, Chaikin and Derlega investigated judgments of appropriateness of self-

disclosure responses. They concluded that "a theoretical approach to mental health and self-disclosure must take into account variables affecting the appropriateness of disclosure, including characteristics of the target and the situation" (p. 592). Of particular interest was the finding that nondisclosure was viewed as relatively appropriate and that the person who did not disclose was viewed as psychologically adjusted by the subjects.

Chaikin and Derlega's study raises questions about the nature of mental health per se and its relationship to social judgments of appropriateness. The selection and validity of "mental health" criteria continues to be a complex and controversial matter. There seems to be little agreement among researchers concerning those evaluative criteria, and this lack of consensus has produced a methodologically murky situation in which mental health is defined operationally as 'whatever the specific instrument measures.'

Those researchers who assign a theoretical link between mental health and one's willingness to be fully known [Jourard (1971) calls this 'transparency'] must not be interpreted to mean that disclosure is best regardless of situational or content factors. This simplistic interpretation has found its way into many subsequent research articles. Jourard, considered the crystallizing force in self-disclosure research, wrote about the

essential role of privacy (1966) and noted in a textbook published in 1980:

> It should not be assumed that the sheer amount of self-disclosure between participants in a relationship is an index of the health of the relationship or of the persons. There are factors as timing, interest of the other person, appropriateness, and effect of disclosures on either participant that must be considered in any such judgment. In one research study, it was found that of the two least liked and most maladjusted members of a work setting, one was found to be the most secretive and undisclosing, and the other was the highest discloser in the group. . . too much disclosure and too little disclosure may be associated with unhealthy personality, whereas some intermediate amount, under appropriate conditions and settings, is indicative of healthier personality. (p. 272)

Although studies of discloser personality and characteristics have been far less than exhaustive, at this stage very little is known about the personality correlates of disclosure behavior. At the same time, other factors have emerged as more powerful predictors of disclosure behavior.

Target. The recipient of self-disclosure is frequently called the 'target', and many studies have supported the importance of the target's identity and characteristics on the subject's willingness to disclose and on the amount of disclosure. Jourard (1966) stated broadly that:

> although some personality and cultural differences have been found to account for variance in self-disclosure, the most powerful determiner thus far discovered is the identity of the person to whom one might disclose himself and the nature and purpose of the relationship between the two people. (p. 311)

Similarly Chelune (1976), in an effort to examine the relative influence of person, target, and setting condition variables on reported willingness to disclose, found that the target accounted for 34% of the variance in determining subjects' willingness to disclose. Factors in the disclosing person accounted for about 14% of the variance, and setting conditions accounted for approximately 15%. Chelune (1979) noted that other investigations have yielded similar results. Tardy, Hosman, and Bradac (1981) attempted to reexamine initial findings by Jourard and associates. In their study with 104 undergraduates, subjects completed a questionnaire with 31 items. Their ANOVA analyses revealed that the target of the disclosure consistently affects and interacts with subject, gender, and topic, to affect reported self-disclosure. The identity of the target and the relationship between the target and discloser accounted for the majority of the variance in self-disclosure in determining the amount of disclosure. Rosenfeld and Kendrick (1984), in an empirical investigation of subjective reasons for self-disclosing, found that target-discloser relationship was of major importance in influencing why an individual disclosed.

Brockhoeft (1979), in a study in which the targets were strangers to the disclosers, identified specific qualities in target behavior which encouraged and

discouraged disclosure by others. If a person presents himself or herself in a distant/nonaccepting manner or a pleasant but essentially indifferent manner, others are not likely to reveal to that target intimate information about themselves. Only when an individual presents herself or himself in a warm/accepting manner are others willing to reveal personal aspects of themselves to the target. The intimacy differences were significant at the .01 level, and the duration differences were significant at the .05 level.

In a questionnaire-based study with 385 undergraduates, Wheeless (1978) reported that a degree of trust must be present for self-disclosure to take place. In addition, the degree of trust directly affected the amount of disclosure. As Wheeless states, "reported self-disclosure to another individual, in terms of greater amount, depth, and honesty, was found to be positively related to the perceived trustworthiness of that individual" (p. 155).

Clearly the identity and characteristics of the target are primary constituents in the decision to disclose. While some studies identified target through role identification (parent, same-sex friend, romantic partner, etc.), others have examined interpersonal qualities of the target such as perceived trust (as measured by the discloser) and interpersonal

warmth/coldness (as measured objectively by the experimenter). Other variables play important roles in disclosure decisions, but the target has emerged as a most significant determinent.

Reciprocity. Another key element in self-disclosure interaction is the reciprocity factor (Jourard, 1971; Taylor, 1979; Bradac, Tardy, & Hosman, 1980; Hill & Stull, 1982; Hosman & Tardy, 1980). There seems to be an overwhelming amount of evidence that as far as breadth of disclosure is concerned and sometimes the depth of disclosure also, individuals give back what they receive (reciprocity) (Taylor, 1979). The reciprocity norm has been explained in terms of social equity. Jourard noted this factor early in his self-disclosure research, which no doubt influenced him further to recommend therapist self-disclosure in the therapeutic interchange.

If social equity is the underlying rationale for reciprocity, however, then the need for reciprocity may not be so powerful between persons of non-peer relationships (like therapist - client). As Mathews (1989) found from a survey of therapists concerning their use of self-disclosure, some therapists choose low amounts of self-disclosure in their therapeutic interactions, apparently without sacrificing client self-disclosure (Mathews, 1989). Among the reasons given by therapists who have lowered their amount of self-disclosure since

they began practicing is lack of effectiveness (41.2%). Mathews also found that some therapists had increased their self-disclosure since they began practicing; again many did so (28.9%) because they found that approach to be beneficial.

Content. Derlega and Chaikin (1977) noted that "self-disclosure tendencies are probably heavily affected by content considerations, a factor that is infrequently considered in self-disclosure studies" (p. 110). The same topic may be discussed from a multitude of angles within which intimacy, personal vulnerability, ego-involvement, and impression management issues vary broadly. Using a questionnaire approach to ask subjects their disclosure habits about a particular topic may gloss over these critical issues. As Chelune (1979) noted, "two subjects may indicate full disclosure on the topic of 'my past record of illness and treatment.' For one person the substance of full disclosure may be an account of the usual childhood diseases, whereas for the other it may include a discussion of venereal disease or cancer" (p. 18). Derlega and Chaikin (1977) suggested, for example, that women appear to be encouraged to reveal information exposing their weaknesses while men are more likely to disclose information about their strengths. Self-reported measures of intimacy, then, may use different standards

and produce research findings that confound deeper differences.

Within this study, individuals are interviwed about their disclosure decisions regarding a particular private experience. Even with this topic consistency, however, attention to subtle differences in the experience's meaning and impact is needed to understand fully the variables involved in the disclosure decisions.

Setting. Perhaps the most overlooked question in research about self-disclosure has been the circumstances within which the disclosure occurred (Chelune, 1979). Was the individual alone with the target during the disclosure? Was the setting one in which interruption was likely? Were the circumstances formal or casual? As Chelune found, setting conditions accounted for 15% of the variance in an early study he performed on persons' willingness to disclose. Do individuals anticipating an important disclosure select the setting conditions in order to control certain variables? Certainly it seems reasonable to claim that the same verbal content may have distinct effects and may be evaluated differently depending on the context in which the self-disclosure occurred.

Pennebaker (1989) who, along with affiliated researchers, has been investigating individuals' willingess to disclose traumatic experience, found that

the physical setting did influence that willingness. In order to separate the act of disclosure from social support variables, Pennebaker's experimental design often stipulated that the individual enter a sound-proof room alone and either write about their traumatic experience or speak about it into a microphone. The applicability of these findings to face-to-face disclosure is not known. Pennebaker reported that "we are convinced that the more distinct the writing situation (i.e., the more removed from the real world), the more likely people will be to express their deepest thoughts and feelings" (p. 216). Clearly, the relationship between self-disclosure and the setting conditions merits further exploration in communication research.

Disclosure and health. The past decade has found many researchers untangling the interconnections between behavior and health. Researchers from several disciplines have begun to focus on disclosure of personal information and the effects of that disclosure on psychosocial adjustment and physiological response. Several studies, for example, have found that hypertensives (individuals with high blood pressure) disclosure less personal information in an interview situation than normotensives. Cumes (1983) designed an experiment in which a group of shoppers agreed to complete a checklist of life concerns following blood pressure measurement at a National Heart

Foundation booth. The checklist listed types of concerns found to be typical life stressors (growing old, feeling lonely, etc.). Hypertensives consistently exhibited a lower rate of disclosure on the checklist than the normotensive group.

Fritz, Williams, and Amylon (1988) sought to predict psychosocial outcome for survivors of childhood cancer by identifying specific antecedent variables. The variables were group into three categories: demographic, illness-related, and psychosocial. The four illness-related factors were nature of diagnostic process, prognosis, treatment difficulty, and residual physical impairment. Psychosocial variables were three in number: directness of communication, peer support, and discouragement during treatment. Psychosocial outcome was assessed through independent raters based on interview material and assessment instruments. Communication patterns during treatment were most predictive of psychosocial outcome whereas indicators of medical severity were least predictive. Fritz adds "the direct communication, the way they talked with their family, their peers and their school teachers, was the variable most predictive of psychological functioning in the survivor" (Schwartz, 1989, p. 2D).

A particularly promising line of investigation about disclosure can be found in the recent work of Pennebaker

and affiliated researchers (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988; Pennebaker, 1989; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1989; Pennebaker, 1990). The work of these researchers "suggests the existence of a general disclosure motive" (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988) and adds significantly to our understanding of disclosure and physiological functioning. Carrying through this line of research is the focus specifically on the health and psychological benefits of "talking about or, in some way, confronting significant life experiences" (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988, p. 331).

In several of these experiments the researchers wanted to eliminate the variables associated with the listener's response to the disclosure, so the disclosure occurs while the individual is alone (either by talking into a microphone or writing about the experience and placing the contents into a box). The application of these findings, therefore, to face-to-face disclosure needs further investigation. These significant life experiences are most often referred to as "traumas". In psychiatric literature, "trauma" refers to "an emotional experience or shock, which has a lasting psychic effect" (Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, 1983). A close reading of the directions given to subjects and the events disclosed clearly demonstrates the upsetting or negative connotation associated with the focal events. Pennebaker

expressed surprise at the number of students who had experienced significant trauma (Pennebaker, 1989).

There are two overlapping concepts in the theoretical positions which underly this line of research. One is the inhibition aspect: "the act of inhibiting ongoing behavior, emotions, and thoughts requires physiological work. A person who constantly thinks about something and wants to discuss it with others often actively holds back in talking about it" (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988, p. 33). Increased inhibition is associated with increases in electrodermal activity. The work of inhibition acts as a cumulative stressor over time, increasing the probability of illness and physical and psychological problems triggered by stress (Pennebaker, 1989). The second aspect, actually the flip side of inhibition, is confrontation. Confrontation "refers to individuals' actively thinking and/or talking about significant experiences as well as acknowledging relevant emotions. Psychologically confronting traumas negates the effects of inhibition, both physiologically and cognitively" (Pennebaker, 1989, p. 231). The cognitive aspects of confrontation are particularly important for communication theorists and these will be addressed later in this section.

Experimental designs varied in this group of research spearheaded by Pennebaker, but the work always

concentrates on the link between disclosure of significant life events and various measures of physiological function such as frequency of health problems, electrodermal activity [which has been found to be related with behavioral inhibition], and immune function. Disclosure processes have included speaking into a microphone while alone, talking to a hidden individual, and writing about the events while alone.

This body of research supports the conclusion that "disclosure of important personal events has physical and psychological benefits" (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988, p. 332). In the writing-disclosure experiments (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988) the individuals who wrote about traumatic events were required to discuss either the relevant facts [trauma-facts], their feelings about the events [trauma-emotion], or both their thoughts and their feelings [trauma-combination]. Two groups, those who wrote about their thoughts and feelings and those who wrote about their feelings only, "reported the greatest anxiety and depression each day after writing. In the follow-up questionnaires, however, these two groups reported being the happiest, healthiest, and least anxious" (p. 330). The remaining two groups, those that only discussed the facts of the trauma and the control groups "appeared to be unaffected by the experiment in virually all respects" (p. 330). Most interesting, however, was the data from the

health center about the individuals' visits before and after the experiment. The one group that exhibited a significant drop in illness visits as compared to the other groups was the trauma-combination group.

A related study compared the effects of talking about traumatic events while alone in a room [with a microphone] to talking to a person hidden behind a curtain. This "father confessor" study found that students did not manifest the same measures of reduced inhibition when the person was behind the curtain. Later students admitted that they did not trust the person on the other side of the curtain (Pennebaker, 1990, p. 120). Clearly, an overarching sense of trust is central to self-disclosure when a listener is present. As these researchers reiterate (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988; Pennebaker, 1990), when a discloser is rejected by the listener, the negative effects can be personally devastating. In a study of incest disclosures, for instance, where the women were denounced by those in whom they confided, the "particularly long-term negative psychological and physical effects" were documented (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988).

For the purposes of the present study, several design features are notable for communication researchers. In the writing experiment, Pennebaker (1989) noted three procedural elements. First, great effort was made by the

lead experimenter to establish rapport with each individual subject. Second, the writing or talking sessions occurred in a "unique and isolated environment." Third, the experimenters went to great lengths to guarantee complete anonymity (p. 216).

Researchers also went to great lengths to warn the students about the possibly upsetting nature of the experiment. Prospective subjects heard a presentation in class in which they were told that participants in the experiment may be required to write or talk about traumatic experiences. The sign-up form contained a similar warning. Other less threatening studies were readily available for credit. The evening before the study began, the subjects were called and advised to withdraw if they had any "qualms." Nevertheless, over 90% of the subjects appeared for the study the following day. On the first day of the study, an experimenter again warns them about the possibly upsetting tone of the experiment and "encourages them to withdraw and receive full credit" (Pennebaker, 1989, p. 215). At the end of the study, students were asked if they would participate in the study again. For the control group, 93% answered affirmatively. For the students in the trauma-disclosure groups, 98% answered yes. Despite the upsetting nature of the trauma disclosures, there appears to be a general willingness to experience that unpleasantness, most probably because a

greater gain is realized. Thus, the experimenters concluded that "a general disclosure motive" exists among human beings.

These experimenters describe the gains in terms of cognitive consequences of confrontation. "The act of confronting a trauma immediately reduces the physiological work of inhibition" (Pennebaker, 1989, p. 231). Eventually, if individuals persevere in the confrontation and resolve the trauma, the overall stress on the body is reduced.

The process of encoding important events linguistically appears to offer specific cognitive opportunities for resolution. Pennebaker (1989) claims, based on his extensive work, that this translation process affords individuals the means to "understand, find meaning in, or attain closure of the experience" (p. 231). Pennebaker (1990) reported that linguistic activity is usually governed by the left-side of the brain (for right-handed people) while the parts of the brain controlling negative emotions are usually localized on the right side. Because trauma involved "major emotions, vivid images, and conscious thoughts" (p. 63), Pennebaker wanted to investigate right and left side brain wave activity during disclosure of traumas. Pennebaker found that little congruence between brain wave activity occurred when individuals discussed trivial topics. But during

disclosure of trauma, brain wave activity was much more highly correlated between left and right sides. As Pennebaker reported,

> The results were even more provocative when we split our volunteers into those who evidenced signs of getting into the letting-go experience and those who did not . . . Further, the more that people achieved brain wave congruence, the more their skin conductance levels dropped. (1990, p. 64)

Skin conductance levels (SCL) have emerged as a promising measure of degree of inhibition. High SCL readings (i.e., how much one's hand perspires) are associated with inhibition work, and a drop in SCL measures is interpreted as a sign that confrontation [and thus, less inhibition] is occurring (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988, p. 331).

Pennebaker and his colleagues recognized that "some people would bare their souls and talk about extremely emotional topics whereas others disclosed fairly minor events in a matter-of-fact manner" (Pennebaker & Susman, 1988, p. 331). In order to distinguish between these groups in one study, independent judges rated the disclosure recordings for degree of disclosure and divided the groups into high disclosers and low disclosers. High disclosers manifested lower SCL readings when talking about trauma than when talking about trivial events. Those individuals who talked about fairly minor events in response to the directive to discuss the "most traumatic experiences of their entire lives" actually manifested a rise in SCL measures. Thus the disclosure event itself

was affected by factors such as the depth of meaning and emotion invested in the focal event and the degree to which the subjects "let go."

In describing the attendant behaviors to the "letting-go" phenomenon, Pennebaker (1990) noted the changes in voice, speaking style, and writing. Volume and pitch changes, increased speaking rate, evidence of faster writing all were noted while subjects disclosed the traumatic event. It is as if "the inhibitory flood gates were open and the words poured out" (p. 54).

Language seems to function as a tool to simplify our experiences (Pennebaker, 1990). Also because writing about an experience or talking about it to another preserves the memory of the experience, there is less reason to ruminate or otherwise rehearse the event within one's mind. The linguistic translation of an important event requires that one organize and structure the various facets which may have appeared overwhelming at first. Pennebaker writes, "words such as realize, understand, resolve, and work through appear in approximately half of the open-ended responses we receive to questions about the general value of the writing experience" (p. 105). The act of transforming a significant experience into linguistically-structured expression can offer a sense of completeness and insight, thus satisfying major psychological needs after important events.

Summary

In this chapter I have placed self-disclosure decisions within the realm of privacy regulation. The basic dynamics of the psychological regulation process with respect to information about the self have been highlighted. Within the rubric of privacy, individuals exercise freedom as they choose to reveal or withhold personal information about the self. Disclosure decisions generally involve a choice between continued secrecy and some degree of revelation.

Communication researchers have always recognized that self-disclosure entails risks. In general, however, self-disclosure has been encouraged by communication researchers since the 1960s. Research illuminating the health benefits of disclosing important events has grown impressively in recent years. The benefits of not-disclosing, however, have been poorly understood beyond obvious needs for self- or other- protection.

In this chapter I have summarized the work of scholars in allied fields who describe the subtle reasons why a choice of secrecy can be a potentially nourishing act. With a balanced and enriched appreciation of these two outcomes, secrecy and self-disclosure, this author will then examine the disclosure decisions individuals make about a particular, powerful happening: the near-death experience. In order more fully to understand those

specific factors which may influence disclosure decisions individuals make about their near-death experience, I will review the research literature concerning that experience in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

REVIEW OF LITERATURE: NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

Introduction

This chapter reviews research literature about the phenomenon that has come to be called "near-death experience." An exhaustive examination of all the research about near-death experience is beyond the scope of this study. The purpose of the present review is twofold. First, a comprehensive description of this phenomenon is necessary in order to identify the qualities and variables which may mediate subsequent decisions of self-disclosure or secrecy. Second, a thorough review of the near-death experience's major features will permit extensions of these research findings about disclosure/ secrecy decisions by identifying important elements that would limit or allow such extensions.

Near-death experience is the modern term for a phenomenon that finds its place in both Eastern and Western heritage wherein an individual who is close to death finds that his or her awareness moves beyond the limits of the physical body and experiences another world. Zaleski (1987), whose examination of this topic began as a dissertation in Religious Studies at Harvard, summarized ancient references to this experience and thoroughly compares the thematic aspects of medieval and modern near-

death experiences in her book Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times. Zaleski uses the following terms almost interchangeably, unless finer distinctions are required: near-death experience, near-death vision, otherworld journey, otherworld vision, deathbed vision, and return from death. Other researchers, whose investigations into this phenomenon rely almost totally on modern narratives, use the term coined by Moody (1975, p. 14), "near-death experience." Investigators from many disciplines have examined near-death experiences within the past 15 years.

All that we know about this reported phenomenon comes from narratives individuals relate after they have revived from their life-threatening crisis. Unless a person decides to self-disclose about this remembered occurrence, non-experiencers have no access to information about near-death experiences. Within this study, I will adopt the common research practice of eliminating the more accurate preface phrase "reported to have" before verbs used to describe the experience's content. Despite this terminology shortcut, I acknowledge that narratives and claims are, in fact, the object of close scrutiny rather than the phenomenon itself. Our complete dependence on these verbal declarations to gather information about the experience inspired Zaleski's (1987) investigation into the "universal laws of symbolic experience . . . [and] the

local and transitory statutes of a given culture" that govern the narrative and imaginative character of these journey accounts" (p. 7). Similarly, our dependence on these accounts inspires the current study. Preceding the return from death narrative is the decision individuals make to disclose those recollections. These disclosure (and non-disclosure) decisions are the subject of this research investigation. Like Zaleski, I base this study on near-death experience descriptions that "at least make the claim that they represent actual experience" (p. 6) and draw upon research which follows that same prescription.

Within this chapter I review modern research findings about near-death experiences. More specifically, I briefly sketch the emergence of modern research in this area and present findings regarding the frequency and character of the experience that have prompted researchers to identify diverse accounts under a single rubric: the near-death experience. Also in this chapter I describe the predominant patterns of the experience's content, impact, and quality, and give a few examples of how infrequent features are sometimes blended with these patterns. Finally, I discuss the experience's similarity with other religious and paranormal experiences, and report the findings or comments researchers have made about experiencers' disclosure activities and motives.

Modern Investigations: Review and Statistics

While accounts of otherworld journeys during life-threatening crises permeate the philosophical, literary, and metaphysical traditions of the world, current investigations about this phenomenon constitute a vigorous effort to gather information about these reported happenings. Modern research is characteristically dated from the publication of Moody's book, Life after Life (1975) although important precursors exist. Moody, a psychiatrist who also holds a Ph.D. in philosophy, first heard about this kind of experience from a first-hand account by a clinical professor of psychiatry in medical school. During Moody's years as professor of philosophy, he noticed that on those occasions when theories of immortality were discussed in class, students occasionally approached him afterwards with a personal experience anecdote about unusual happenings while the individual (or a friend) was near death. By 1975, Moody had personally interviewed approximately 150 persons about the events they recalled during a time of near-death. Moody noted a remarkable similarity between these accounts; his discovery of recurring patterns in these reports led him to view the experiences as a single phenomenon, which he named "the near-death experience". Moody began publishing and speaking about these patterns, although he was fully

aware that his data-gathering methodology lacked scientific rigor.

Moody's published findings inaugurated a period of intense research, with scholars and professionals from diverse backgrounds turning their attention to this phenomenon. Major researchers in this field include Ring, a research psychologist specializing in altered states of consciousness, Sabom, a cardiologist, Morse, a pediatrician, Greyson, a psychiatrist, and Zaleski, a religious studies scholar. Countless other professionals have made significant contributions as well. During the past 15 years of research, more than a thousand individuals have been interviewed about their recollections from the time they were near death. Prospective studies and a national survey have been conducted in order to determine the frequency of this remembered experience.

Several independent studies found that when individuals are interviewed about a physical crisis in which their lives were in peril, approximately 40% will describe elements of a near-death experience when asked about their memories from that time. Gallup (1982), who included these questions among other interview questions in a nationwide survey, did not specifically require the crisis event to include a period of unconsciousness. Gallup found that approximately 35% of respondents who had

been close to death answered affirmatively when asked if they remembered any "unusual experience" such as "experiences of continued life or an awareness after death" during their crisis (Gallup, 1982, p. 198). Based on Gallup's projections, five percent of American adults have personally encountered a near-death experience (Gallup, 1982).

Ring (1982), whose sample of 102 persons came from medical referrals as well as nonmedical/self referrals, found that 48% "recounted experiences that conform in an obvious way, at least in part, to the core experience pattern as delineated by Moody" (p. 32). In this sample, the rate of near-death experiences was higher (58%) for nonmedical and self referrals than for the group that was contacted through medical referrals (39%). As part of his research project, Ring developed a Weighted Core Experience Index (WCEI), and required that narratives attain a minimum score on the WCEI (as judged by three raters) before he would include that report as a "near-death experience." This particular design element may have led to an underestimation of experiences, as Ring has noted (p. 33). Comparing experiencers with non-experiencers, Ring found that these two groups were notable for their demographic similarity rather than disparity. Thus, in terms of the demographic variables included in Ring's research (race, gender, social class,

marital status, religious affiliation [including 'none' and 'agnostic/atheist'], and degree of religiousness) demographic variables are unrelated to the likelihood of having a core near-death experience during a life-threatening crisis. Persons who had some prior knowledge of near-death experiences were less likely to report having one during their own near-death crises (Ring, 1985). Ring (1982) found that the core near-death experience appears to be essentially the same regardless of the cause of crisis: accident, illness, or suicide. In 1982 Ring stated, "the evidence from our own investigation as well as that from other work leads decisively to the affirmation that the core experience is a highly robust phenomenon" (p. 200). And after two more years of research, Ring framed his conclusions even more strongly: "One of the firmest conclusions to be drawn from the body of near-death research is that the NDE itself is an authentic and much replicated phenomenon--there is simply no doubt that it occurs" (1985, p. 38).

Sabom (1982) began his investigation with a clear expectation that a physiological and/or psychological explanation for the "near-death" phenomenon would emerge. As a cardiologist Sabom had ready access to persons who "had been rendered unconscious and physically near death--that is, in any bodily state that would reasonably be expected to result in irreversible biological death in the

majority of instances and would demand (if available) urgent medical attention" (p. 152). In addition, Sabom was able to verify, in nearly every case, the fact that the individual had been near death.

Sabom interviewed 116 persons who had survived a near-death crisis. In reaching conclusions about the frequency of the near-death experience, however, Sabom considered only the ratio from among the 78 persons whose reports had been gathered in a prospective fashion. No information about them was known before the interview except that their physical crises fulfilled the requirements of being 'near death'. (Sabom also eliminated 10 cases from his prospective group who encountered their near-death event during general anesthesia because it was impossible to ascertain whether the loss of consciousness was due to the anesthesia alone or would have occurred as a result of the severity of the medical crisis.) For the prospectively-gathered sample, Sabom reports that 43% recounted a near-death experience. Sabom also checked medical records and interviewed persons present during the resuscitation efforts whenever possible to verify reports by the patients who claimed to have witnessed these crisis events while unconscious. As Sabom (1982) reports,

> The details of these perceptions were found to be accurate in all instances where corroborating evidence was available. Moreover, there appeared to be no plausible explanation for the accuracy of these

> observations involving the usual physical senses. . . My current beliefs are based on the analysis of only a small number. . .Much additional research is needed. (p. 184)

Sabom investigated possible explanations for the reported phenomena: semiconsciousness, conscious fabrication, subconscious fabrication, depersonalization, autoscopic hallucination, dreams, prior expectation, drug-induced delusion or hallucination, endorphin release, temporal lobe seizures, and altered states of consciousness caused by hypoxia or hypercarbia. Sabom concluded at the end of his study that no explanation could satisfactorily account for the phenomenon. Moody (1988), in his third book on the subject, draws a similar conclusion:

> For years I have been trying to discover a physiological explanation for NDEs. And for years I have come up empty-handed. It just seems to me that all the so-called explanations are incomplete or ill formed. For the most part, the people who have derived them are people who have never taken the trouble to talk with NDEers, look them in the face, and listen to their stories. (p. 150)

A carefully designed set of studies of childhood near-death experiences was conducted by a pediatrician, Melvin Morse, and associates (Morse, Conner, & Tyler, 1985; Morse, Castillo, Venecia, Milstein, & Tyler, 1986; Morse,1990). Morse gathered a control group of 121 seriously ill children who--though gravely ill--were not actually near death at any time. None of those children had a near-death experience. A second group of 37 children was assembled who had "been treated with almost

every kind of mind-altering medication known to pharmocology" (Morse, 1990, p. 21). None of this group had any experience resembling a near-death experience. The experimental group was comprised of 12 children who had survived cardiac arrest or unexpectedly recovered from deep comas. Eight of those 12 (66%) "had visions of leaving their bodies and traveling to other realms" (p. 40). Because his investigation of medical records was extremely thorough, including careful matching between control and experimental groups, thorough documentation of drugs and anesthesia, and analyses of blood gases, Morse concluded that the near-death experience was clearly associated with the dying process and was not associated with drugs.

The basic characteristics shared by virtually all near-death experiences are the following:

1) The remembered events have an extremely vivid quality, whose reality is unquestioned by the individual.

2) The experience is described as occuring in a dimension of existence beyond the physical body, either clearly out of the body (as when one's body is viewed from an outside point) or of such a nature that the happenings seem radically inconsistent with typical somatic and time-space norms (e.g. visiting otherworldly planes of existence, traveling at

extremely high speeds, or communicating telepathically with other, non-corporeal beings.)

3) The events are perceived by the experiencer to have been specifically triggered because death was imminent.

4) Although the happenings during the near-death experience may seem 'strange' or 'weird' from the viewpoint of normal consciousness, from within the experience itself a tone of naturalness pervades. The happenings are not experienced as counter-nature, but rather as highly developed expressions of human potential. Indeed experiencers have remarked that after experiencing both the everyday world and the world of the transcendent, it is the everyday world which needs 'explaining.'

Until quite recently, reports of distressing near-death experiences have been rare in the research literature. The prototypical near-death experience, therefore, typically includes both quality and content which is consoling and uplifting (Ring, 1982, pp. 192-193). At this point in near-death research, it is not possible to say with confidence what percentage of near-death experiences might be of a distressing nature. Perhaps reports of this type of experience are rare because distressing experiences are rare. Perhaps reports of this type are rare because disclosures subsequent to a

distressing experience are withheld. Occasionally individuals report feeling "scared or confused near the beginning of their experience" (Ring, 1982, p. 192), but among the studies of Moody, Ring, Sabom, and Morse, not a single instance of a 'hellish' experience was reported.

Quite recently, as part of a concerted effort to locate reports of distressing near-death experiences, preliminary findings were published (Greyson & Bush, 1992). Those authors were prompted in part by 30 such distressing accounts that were mailed to the International Association of Near-Death Studies over a period of 10 years. When accounts of distressing experiences were specifically requested in that group's newsletter, 50 reports were collected. In their recent article, Greyson and Bush noted three constellations of features within these 50 accounts. The first group wrote accounts that matched the prototypical peaceful reports, but the individuals felt terror because either death or loss of control was feared. A second group, occurring most often during childbirth, described dark voids and despair. A third and smaller group produced reports of "graphic hellish symbolism" (p. 105)

It is still not possible to assess accurately the proportion of near-death experiences which are distressing. In fact, researchers can not know with certainty either the frequency of near-death experience

occurrences or the proportion which may be of a distressing nature; decisions not to disclose pose constraints on research findings. Current research in this area draws almost exclusively from accounts of uplifting experiences.

Content: Patterns

The happenings within a specific near-death experience typically follow one of several scenarios. Some researchers (Moody, 1975, 1977, 1988; Ring, 1982, 1985) describe the constellations of recurring elements in terms of 'stages' or 'completeness.' Ring, for instance, delineates five stages: peace, body separation, entering the darkness, seeing the light, entering the light. Ring found that these stages typically unfolded in sequence, although there are instances of stages occurring out of sequence, as in those cases where an individual saw 'the light' without a preceding realm of darkness.

Moody (1975, p. 75) lists ten discrete elements that tend to recur in the narratives, and reports that typically a subset is present in each near-death experience: hearing the news of death, feelings of peace, a noise, dark tunnel, out of the body, meeting others, the being of light, the life review, the border or limit, and coming back. The content of a specific near-death experience may overlap only in part with that of another near-death experience. Thus while near-death experiences

share many points of similarity, the specific elements present in any single near-death experience constitute an individual's uniquely constellated encounter with a state of awareness beyond the boundaries of ordinary consciousness. If an individual near-death experience included a life-review, for example, that person may carry a specific set of insights into her or his overall life activity that may not be available in the same way to one whose experience did not include that element. Those experiences that include an encounter with a 'Being of Light' may be described in more spiritual terms than those encounters that did not contain that element.

Sabom (1982) found it more meaningful to group near-death experiences into three general patterns: autoscopic (viewing one's body from a point outside the body), transcendental (experience of a dimension or region quite apart from the earthly surroundings of the physical body), and combination (reports that include both of the previous two happenings.) This scheme highlights critical distinctions between the two possible modes for being 'out of body.' <u>At least one of these modes is found in every near-death experience</u>. In Sabom's sample 33% contained only autoscopic elements, 48% contained only transcendental elements, and 19% contained elements of both.

The former possible mode of being 'out of body', witnessing one's body from a point outside the body, carries a kind of 'sensate' certainty for those individuals. These experiencers believe they have evidence to offer which will stand up to the scrutiny of corroboration. They ask, 'how could I have known all these details unless I was truly observing the crisis scene?' After experiences of this type, these individuals may feel compelled to embark on a corroboration effort of their own, one that may possibly trigger disclosures about at least part of their near-death experience.

At least two medical researchers (Sabom, 1982; Morse, 1990) have made specific efforts to determine if these reported observations can be substantiated. They have thoroughly reviewed the medical records of the crisis event, inspected the crisis scene, and interviewed those present at the crisis/resuscitation event. Sabom even assembled a control group of twenty-five "seasoned" cardiac patients who "had considerable exposure to hospital routine and television programs, both of which could have contributed to their knowledge of CPR" and asked them to describe in visual detail what they imagined they would see if they were watching a cardiac resuscitation (1982, p. 84). Most of this control group (twenty) made major errors in their description, two persons made no descriptive attempts, and three gave

"limited" descriptions which provided general approximations of the procedures. After their extensive corroboration efforts, then, both Sabom and Morse concluded that those individuals who claimed to have witnessed the resuscitation procedures during their near-death experience provided descriptions that were both detailed and accurate. Sabom (1982) summarized his reaction:

> The details of these perceptions were found to be accurate in all instances where corroborating evidence was available. Moreover, there appeared to be no plausible explanation for the accuracy of these observations involving the usual physical senses. An out-of-body (extrasensory?) mechanism would explain both the personal interpretation afforded these experience by those who had them (i.e., 'the spirit left the body') and the 'visual' accuracy of the autoscopic observations. (p. 184)

Those individuals whose out-of-body experience occurs in a transcendental realm are fully aware that they can bring back with them little in terms of 'convincing evidence' about the reality of their experience. Despite this, the experience bestows its own inner certainty, an assurance that often occurs in the form of penetrating spiritual/psychological insight, resolution of deep personal conflicts, dissolution of fears, or transformative encounters with sublime peace, wisdom, and love. Here again, the particular elements that occur impart their own unique legacy in terms of subsequenct impact on the individual. One whose transcendental near-death experience involved movement through a peaceful dark

region toward a brilliant light, movement which was interrupted before the light was reached, may carry a conviction that death does not mark the end of existence and is not to be feared. But another whose experience also included entry into a region of light where a loving being is encountered, may add to convictions that awareness survives death additional claims about what that state of awareness will offer.

Near-death experiences that include both autoscopic and transcendental realms offer a range of assurances to the experiencer. Often these two realms are encountered in consecutive sequence, although the two can merge so that access to transcendental realms coincides with visual access to the crisis scene. These individuals, then, bring back from their experience the kind of claims that are amenable to corroborative tests and a belief that movement to transcendental realms of existence will follow death.

One element that be may be crucial for understanding the post-event attitudes of the experiencer is the apparent cause of the experience's termination. At times, the individual is offered a 'free choice' whether to remain in the transcendental realm or to return to their body. Many experiencers, however, are not offered such a choice; they are commanded by a voice or presence to return to their life, usually with the explanation that

their earthly 'work' is not finished. In many other cases, the experience ends without apparent cause in the out-of-body realm. In these latter cases, individuals typically attribute the end of the experience to some resuscitation procedure and often exhibit great anger towards those medical professionals who tore them away from that place of peace and bliss. Rarely, an individual will 'argue' or 'bargain' with the being of Light (Ring, 1982, p. 80) in order to regain the opportunity to return to their earthly existence.

Content: Anomalies

Although researchers vary in the ways in which they group recurring elements of near-death experiences, a close reading of these various cases and research reports reveals that the narratives themselves do indeed contain recurring motifs of striking similarity. Seldom will a near-death experience include all the elements that are noted in the research literature. Frequently an experience will include happenings which are not among the more widely reported features. To appreciate fully the experience's aftereffects, it is of the utmost importance to understand that the experience does not have a 'programmed' quality to it. Many experiencers would describe their near-death experience as having been particularly tailored to address their specific needs and

character. A few examples will illustrate the flavor of these less-common features.

One woman, an author whose three near-death experiences are the subject of her book Coming Back to Life (Atwater, 1988), noted that during her first near-death experience 'dark gray blobs' floated around in the air around her while she was outside of her body. Very slowly, as she pondered and studied these blobs, she noted that with each thought a new blob appeared. Gradually she realized that thoughts attained a reality of their own, a discovery she pursued even further during her second near-death experience several days later. Following a life review in the second experience, Atwater noted:

> I had no idea...that every thought, word, and deed was remembered, accounted for, and went out and had a life of its own once released; nor did I know that the energy of that life directly affected all it touched or came near. (pp. 36-37)

A Jewish woman, who turned angrily against her early belief in God because of the Holocaust, had a near-death experience in her early twenties. Her experience included both autoscopic and transcendental elements, and brought her into the presence of the light with whom she had a confrontational dialogue.

> There, before me, was the living presence of the Light....Deep within me came an instant and wondrous recognition: I, even I, was facing God. I immediately lashed out at Him with all the questions I had ever wondered about; all the injustices I had seen in the physical world. I don't know if I did this deliberately, but I discovered that God knows all your thoughts immediately and responds

> telepathically. . . . There was a reason for <u>everything</u> that happened, no matter how awful it appeared in the physical realm. And within myself, as I was given the answer, my own awakening mind now responded in the same manner: 'Of course,' I would think, 'I already know that. How could I have ever forgotten!' Indeed it appears that all that happens is for a purpose, and that purpose is already known to our eternal self. (Ring, 1991, pp.15-16)

This example demonstrates the ways in which one's personal temperament and concerns can affect part of the experience's tone or content. An individual who is by nature argumentative may report extensive questioning during the experience, as if their 'full assent' requires extensive evidence. On the other hand, an individual who is highly analytical might examine the structural details of the out-of-body experience in more detail.

Yet another feature, usually not listed as a recurring element but appearing occasionally in individual accounts, is an encounter in transcendent near-death experiences with a "realm of bewildered spirits" (Moody, 1977). Moody was able to gather a few reports about this feature and noted that experiencers agreed on several points about these spirits (pp. 18-22). First, these spirits were unable to surrender their attachments to the physical world. In two cases these bewildered spirits were observed trying to make contact with living humans on the earth plane, trying to give them advice such as urging them to live with more love. Second, these bewildered beings appeared to be 'dulled' as if their consciousness

was somehow limited. Third, the out-of-body observers believed that these dulled spirits would only stay in that realm until they somehow resolved the problem or difficulty that was keeping them in that perplexed state.

As these examples demonstrate, near-death experiences involve a constellation of repeating elements combined with unique and personal features. The near-death experience is not a prepackaged event. Rather, this experience involves a sequence of event-elements that makes each experience necessarily related to other near-death experiences yet decidedly unique in its particular manifestation.

Aftereffects

When one examines the subsequent impact of a near-death experience, there are definitely a few broad trends. However, subsequent integration of the experience into an individual's everyday living involves an interplay between the specific details of one's near-death experience and the character of the individual. Two independent studies have attempted to measure specific aftereffects, and their results have demonstrated remarkable agreement on three factors. Both Ring (1982) and Sabom (1982) investigated the effect of a near-death experience on an individual's belief in life after death, loss of fear of death, and increase in religiousness. Religiousness is assessed through a few questions in which experiencers are asked if

this happening increased their 'religiousness', their belief in God and an afterlife. In both studies comparisons were made between those individuals who had encountered a near-death experience during a physical crisis and those who had endured similar physical crises but did not report having encountered a near-death experience. In this way, they hoped to delineate aftereffects that could be attributed to the near-death experience itself and not merely to one's encounter with a life-threatening crisis. Both Sabom and Ring found that near-death experiencers reported a marked decrease in fear of death while nonexperiencers tended to show no systematic change (Ring $p < .0005$, Sabom $p < .001$). In addition Sabom demonstrated that this effect persists for up to two years after the near-death crisis. Experiencers showed a dramatic postincident increase in belief in life after death whereas nonexperiencers showed virtually no increase ($p < .001$ for both Ring and Sabom). Finally, Ring's study demonstrated that experiencers tended to increase in religiousness ($p < .05$ to $p < .005$ for different measures). Sabom noted a similar effect, though he did not report his statistical findings. Ring (1982) describes this increase in religiousness with the following summary:

> Although there are some exceptions to this generalization, increased religiousness among core experiencers does not as a rule take the form of more frequent church attendance or other modes of formal

> religious observances. Rather, it is that a heightened inner religious feeling reveals itself afterward, and this feeling does not seem to require a formal channel of religious ritual in order to express itself; indeed, some people actually assert that organized forms of religious observance tend to interfere with the expression of this inner religious impulse. In general, then, core experiencers tend to state that they feel closer to God afterward rather than closer to their church. (p. 162)

These three aftereffects--belief in life after death, loss of fear of death, and increased religiousness--have been noted with considerable regularity among near-death experiencers. There's no question that the experience has the potential to initiate significant and long-lasting changes in the beliefs and lives of the individuals. The near-death experience is a traumatic event in the psychiatric sense (an emotional experience, or shock, which has a lasting psychic effect). A period of adjustment follows. Beyond the three aftereffects already mentioned, several other trends have been noted. These occur less often than the three cited above. For instance, a large proportion of near-death experiencers undergo some of the following changes which they attribute to the experience itself: career shifts, interest in less materialistic lifestyles, relationship disruption, and enhanced psychic sensitivity (such as precognition, ESP, additional out-of-body events, etc.). Near-death experiences have a suicide-inhibiting effect (Greyson, 1983b). Repeatedly several themes emerge when experiencers are asked what they learned from their

experiences: the importance of love and knowledge [wisdom], and the purposefulness of earthly existence. However, the specific purpose of one's individual life in that overall design may be unclear, bringing immense frustration to many experiencers. In addition to the three robust aftereffects, a host of changes are attributed to the experience in varying degrees of intensity and applicability.

Quality

Just as the near-death experience varies in terms of the number of event-elements encountered, so does the intensity of the experience vary. But in considering the qualities of the experience itself, a striking consensus emerges in the narratives. The near-death experience is an event of great immediacy, an immediacy of such moment that the everyday world pales in comparison. Ring (1985) has summarized this quality in the following way:

> [Core NDErs] become what they know; their knowledge lives and grows within them. It is as if the core of the NDE becomes their core. The NDE is, then, not merely an experience that becomes a cherished memory that people may later take comfort in. It is not even an experience that 'changes one's life.' It is one's life. And it becomes the source of one's true being in the world. (p. 50)

Phrases like "the experience was more real to me than anything on earth" (Ring, 1991, p. 30) are plentiful in the research literature. It appears that a near-death experience supplants one's definition of reality because it provides a completely new plane of reference. This new

and expanded sense of immediacy may be impossible to describe. Some glimpse into this power may be intimated through contrast with the world's artificiality and remoteness as described by near-death experiencers. Consider the description written by Carl Jung (1961/1963), the seasoned and distinguished psychiatrist, about those moments of return to earthly existence after his own near-death experience at age 69:

> I was profoundly disappointed. . . . In reality, a good three weeks were still to pass before I could truly make up my mind to live again. I could not eat because all food repelled me. . . . Disappointed, I thought, 'Now I must return to the 'box system' again.' For it seemed to me as if behind the horizon of the cosmos a three-dimensional world had been artificially built up, in which each person sat by himself in a little box. And now I should have to convince myself all over again that this was important! Life and the whole world struck me as a prison, and it bothered me beyond measure that I should again be finding all that in quite order. I had been so glad to shed it all. . . . I felt violent resistance to my doctor because he had brought me back to life. (pp. 292-293)

This quality of immediacy bestows an unshakeable inner certainty about the reality of the experience. In addition, the quality of exquisite freedom during the experience stands in sharp juxtaposition to the 'weighted' nature of earthly experience. Near-death experiences, especially those that include transcendental realms, are described as taking the individual beyond boundaries: the constraints of time and space are no longer relevant, and thoughts and feelings are completely revealed. Communication with other 'beings' encountered during the

experience (for example, the Being of Light, deceased relatives, helpful spirits) is instantaneous, telepathic, and absolutely clear.

Occasionally, in the early moments of a near-death experience when the individual's 'spirit' is becoming oriented to an out-of-body mode, a bit of confusion is felt. Also occasionally during a life-review, the experiencer may endure a sense of regret and pain about their reexamined past behaviors. It is the quality of peace, however, that dominates the flavor of near-death experiences. During the experiences of dark realms, during the movement toward light, during the witnessing of the resuscitation effort, in the countenance of the being who watches the life review alongside the experiencer -- throughout the near-death experience a pervasive and profound sense of peace prevails.

In addition to a sense of pervasive peace, other uplifting qualities like bliss, joy, and love are mentioned often as the dominant characteristics within this experience. Near-death experiences are often regarded as sacred experiences of divine splendor. Especially in those cases where transcendental realms are included, experiencers will report happiness of ineffable proportions as a sense of awe fills the returned experiencer. And, as Hawkins and Schotter (1984) report, encounters with the ineffable are punctuated with an

inherent paradox: a compelling desire to describe the experience coupled with the certainty that the experience cannot be adequately described.

Before completing this review of literature, I will briefly discuss two more aspects: the experience's similarity with other paranormal or religious experiences, and speculative comments made by researchers about experiencers' subsequent disclosures.

Related Phenomena

General agreement among researchers that near-death experiences are robust phenomena does not mean that researchers agree in their interpretations of the experience. As a step in that broader interpretive process, researchers have searched for similar phenomena in medical, paranormal, and religious literature. As noted above, near-death experiences share features which permit us to consider them under a single rubric. At the same time, however, near-death experiences consist of a subset of recurring events coupled with unique features. A thorough discussion of overlap with other kinds of experiences, then, must take into consideration the variety that occurs within near-death experiences themselves. Like a human hand, near-death experiences share a central core with variations that extend in several different directions. The International Association for Near-Death Studies recognizes the family

resemblance between near-death experiences and other kinds of experiences. The Association dedicates its research and support effort to those persons who've had "near-death or simlar experiences."

All near-death experiences are examples of happenings beyond the normal range of consciousness. Because this experience is reported to occur most often during a period of unconsciousness (in much of the research, during a time of documented unconsciousness) there is necessarily much speculation about its nature and etiology. Those researchers who have studied this phenomenon in depth (including a program of extensive interviews with many individuals) are convinced that these reports stem from a "robust" phenomenon of some kind for which conventional explanations have proved inadequate.

Researchers cite evidence, for instance, such as the near-death experience's striking patterns, its extraordinarily vivid quality, and the individuals' own adamant testimony in distinguishing the near-death experience from dreams and hallucinations. Near-death experiences are decidedly similar to other out-of-body experiences in paranormal literature. For instance, both autoscopic and transcendental near-death experiences, encompassing journeys 'out of the body and into other realms', have recently been compared to shamanic initiations by Ring (1989). Anthropologist Holger Kalweit

calls shamans 'astronauts of inner space' and subsumes near-death experiences under shamanic journeys in his broad study of shamanic experience (1984/1988). Those near-death experiences in which individuals hover near their bodies share features with other out-of-body descriptions in paranormal literature, especially those out-of-body experiences where the returned 'traveller' offers evidence of what s/he witnessed while the body was asleep, unconscious, or otherwise incapable of making these observations.

Pennachio (1986) notes that near-death experiences exhibit many attributes of mystical awareness. In forming this judgment, Pennachio considered the content, quality, and impact of mystical experiences as categorized by Pahnke (Pennachio, 1986, p. 67). He reports that both near-death experiences and mystical experiences share many of the same features.

> The experience is a peak event, often the single greatest event shaping outlook on life, goals, and values. . . . It is as if there is a brief but intense program in mysticism and, as a result, recognition of the construction and limitations of social reality. Spiritual values, the higher self, and higher consciousness come to influence life. (p. 70)

Providing evidence that establishes the similarity between near-death experiences and mystical experiences does not provide an explanation as such for near-death experiences. However, it does offer researchers and experiencers a body of literature to which they can turn

for additional insight. Discernment is still required in delineating those particular near-death experiences which overlap with mystical experience from those which do not. Furthermore, as Quimby (1989) notes, the near-death experience seems to be a unique type of mystical experience. In contrast to traditional accounts of mystical experiences, near-death experiences come unbidden, to unprepared individuals, in the midst of extreme crisis, and with highly patterned content.

Some near-death experiences are characterized as religious conversion experiences by the individuals, though this is not a uniform characterization (Raft & Andresen, 1986). Religious conversion experiences typically involve a sudden and dramatic conviction that one has been on the 'wrong path' and now has an opportunity to make significant religious changes (Harding, 1987). It is this binary element ('wrong' and 'right' paths, for instance) and a subsequent sense of mission that seems to lend a tone of dogmatism to many religious conversion experiences (Raft and Andresen, 1986). In contrast, Ring (1982, 1985) has noted that the spiritual transformations after near-death experiences generally follow a universalist, non-dogmatic pattern, though exceptions to this trend are definitely found in the research corpus.

In medical literature, some minimal similarity has been noted between near-death experiences, hypoxia (low oxygen levels), and temporal lobe seizures (which can trigger out-of-body experiences) (Sabom, 1982). There are important dissimilarities in content, quality, and impact that differentiate the near-death experience from the latter two medical conditions. The similarity between near-death experiences and experiences sometimes reported during hypercarbia (extremely high carbon dioxide levels) is a closer one. Hypercarbia was extensively studied as a possible treatment for various psychoneurotic conditions by L. J. Meduna in the 1950s (Sabom, 1982, pp. 176). Hypercarbic episodes sometimes trigger reports of bodily detachment, a bright light, revival of past memories, telepathic communion with a religious presence, and feelings of ecstasy. In addition to these features which are similar to near-death experience reports, hypercarbic events have also been associated with perceptions of brightly colored geometric patterns, animation of fantasized objects, compulsions to solve mathematical puzzles, and frightening perceptions of horror (Sabom, 1982, pp. 176-177).

Sabom acknowledges that with cardiac arrests a hypercarbic condition could rapidly develop in the brain. He has established one case where an individual reported a near-death experience and their carbon dioxide level was

monitored and normal at the time. Because the hypercarbic treatments conducted in the 1950s often brought individuals to the point of "extreme neurological dysfunction . . . [which] resembles in many ways a clinical report of a patient during a cardiac arrest" Sabom points out that it's possible that those treatments brought individuals near-death, thus triggering a near-death experience. It is impossible at this time to determine fully the relationship between hypercarbia and near-death experience.

Observations about Disclosure

No researcher has yet conducted a thorough study of disclosure practices and motives among near-death experiencers. Nevertheless, within the research literature can be found speculative and observational comments about experiencer's willingness or reluctance to discuss their unusual happening with others. Some of these observations are based on first-hand interviews where the content of the near-death experience was the primary focus. Other opinions have been extracted or inferred from meta-statements made by experiencers at the beginning of their near-death accounts. These comments which arise from varied sources loosely cohere as a kind of 'folk tradition', a collection of opinions and speculations about disclosure motives and practices for near-death experiencers which has not been systematically

examined. Ring (1982), for example, summarizes the principal aspects of an experiencer's disclosure practices in this way:

> Afterward, when he is able to recount his experience, he finds that there are simply no words adequate to convey the feelings and quality of awareness he remembers. He may also be or become reticent to discuss it with others, either because he feels no one will really be able to understand it or because he fears he will be disbelieved or ridiculed. (p. 103)

Zaleski (1987) notes that the 'motif of reluctance to publish' is a powerful literary convention shaping accounts of medieval near-death experiences. As such, this motif draws upon a formal heritage which serves to heighten the importance of the narrative. She adds, "whereas modern readers might doubt the veracity of a narrative filled with easily recognized conventions, medieval readers considered the recurrence of well-known motifs a sign of authenticity" (p. 85). Psychoanalysts Raft and Andresen (1986) write, "as all students of this subject observe, people are inclined to be hesitant to talk to others about their near-death experiences, for they fear being ridiculed" (p. 321). Silver (1986) comments that these individuals must "intuitively recognize that envy contributes heavily to the impulse to ridicule" (p. 351).

Zaleski (1987), whose comparison between medieval and modern near-death experiences draws heavily from the work of first-hand interviewers like Moody, Ring, Sabom,

believes that the motif of initial reluctance to speak about one's near-death experience comes only in part from literary convention. Reluctance also serves to protect the experience's sacred or secret character, to preserve the experience's potency, to protect the experiencer from disbelief and embarrassment, in response to medical professionals' fear of malpractice, and as a reflection of physician disinterest and unapproachability (pp. 147-148). On the other hand, Zaleski reports that some experiencers may tell their story as part of a mission they believe they have been given (p. 147).

Freeman (1985) noted that counselors or researchers who spent time listening to accounts of near-death experiences observed that individuals "really appreciated the opportunity to talk about their experiences with an open understanding person; they also appreciated knowing that many others also had NDEs" (p. 359). There is some evidence to suggest that hearing first-hand accounts of near-death experiences can produce effects similar to having a near-death experience. A study of clergy's attitudes and exposure to near-death experience accounts (Royse, 1985) showed that listeners report a reduced fear of dying and increased religiousness. Royse suggests that the utility of these accounts "for strengthening the weak in faith and comforting the dying" needs to be explored (p. 42).

Summary

Because an examination of disclosure motives and practices after a near-death experience requires a foundational understanding of the experience itself, I have reviewed research findings about near-death experiences in this chapter. After briefly sketching the emergence of modern scholarship in this area, I presented major findings about the frequency and character of this phenomenon called "near-death experience." I discussed the predominant patterns of the experience's content, impact, and quality. A few examples were presented to demonstrate less frequent features and how they blend with recurring motifs. A brief discussion of the near-death experience's similarity to other religious, paranormal, and medical phenomena was included. Finally, I summarized the comments that appear in research literature about disclosure activities and motives of near-death experiencers as they become narrators of their first-hand accounts.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Though research methods in the field of communication theory vary, these quests for scientific knowledge about human communication involve three interrelated processes: "observing and describing communication phenomena, developing theoretical explanations for observed phenomena, and verifying the reasonableness of theoretical formulations" (Smith, 1988, p. 8). The choice of method comes not from some claim about ultimate superiority; rather, this choice becomes a matter of selecting suitable investigative tools for specific research purposes.

This study is an examination of disclosure decisions and interactions in which near-death experiencers reveal (or consider revealing) their first-hand account of this extraordinary happening. Three research questions serve to guide this investigation:

1) Whom do these persons talk with about their near-death experience?

2) What variables mediate the decision to disclose or not disclose the nature of the near-death experience?

3) What variables govern the evaluation of the telling experience as satisfying or dissatisfying?

As Zaleski (1987) notes, researchers cannot investigate the near-death experience itself. Rather, researchers study narratives and claims subsequent to the experience, what Zaleski calls "the literary and oral retelling" (p. 112). When these reports, claims, and narratives are oral, they are generated in mutually constructed dialogues. This study investigates those dialogic disclosure events.

A literature review suggests that near-death experiencers may be expected to have considerable reluctance about disclosing this private experience. The experience itself is described by researchers in the field as a significant and transforming happening. Finally, much disclosure research in communication theory expounds and/or demonstrates the benefits of self-disclosure, especially self-disclosure of important and/or traumatic happenings. This propensity to view disclosure as a healthy choice has been buoyed recently by research in the field of psychoneuroimmunology. Informed by these and related theoretical understandings, I searched for a methodology for this study that would offer the opportunity to gather self-reports about disclosure motives and satisfactions.

Initial Interviews

Originally I envisioned an in-depth interview approach during which I would ask near-death experiencers

to discuss their past disclosure decisions and conversations about their remarkable happening. The process of gathering a group of interview questions was begun. I anticipated that I would face some difficulty in locating individual near-death experiencers and would also encounter a general reluctance to meet and discuss this experience in depth. While I prepared for a rather straightforward interview process, I recognized that deep emotion would undoubtedly play a role from time to time. In view of the paucity of information about disclosure interactions involving near-death experiences, I adopted the open stance of the ethnographic researcher that my "best guess" beforehand most likely would be challenged by the interview interactions themselves.

I nurtured the hope that these interviews might reveal means of more expansive insight into the nature of these disclosure processes, and toward that hope I decided to keep a fieldwork notebook. This hope was fulfilled quite dramatically during the initial contacts and interviews when some unexpected happenings occurred. Agar (1986) calls these moments "occasioned breakdowns." The ethnographic researcher mines these opportunities and determines whether the vein holds the promise of riches. Rather than view these surprises as interferences or superfluous data, I accepted them as potential sources of

rich understandings and allowed these happenings to shape my methodological approach.

I saw that these interviews, as well as my interactions with the experiencers before and after the interviews, offered far more than the exchange of referential information. My interactions with these people functioned as communicative indexes to the experience itself and to the relative importance of subsequent disclosure decisions. Metacommunicative remarks prior to, during, and after the interview occasions multiplied potential sources of insight. A description of a few happenings will illustrate something of the nature of these surprises and their subsequent influence on my methodology.

My first interview occurred on a college campus with a male student. He had previously discussed his near-death experience with a professor who also knew of my research. When I telephoned this student to ask for an interview, he seemed very guarded. He wanted to know my own opinion of near-death experiences first. I replied that I knew the experiences were absolutely real to the person involved, and that they deserved respect as an event of great significance to the individual. "Does that sound fair?" I asked. "Well, yes. Did [professor] tell you about the circumstances that preceded this experience?" "Mmm, I'm not sure," I replied, "was it a

car accident?" "I will only agree to talk about my experience if I don't have to divulge the preceding situation," he countered. "It was quite violent." I agreed to abide by any conditions he set. He then added that it would be very difficult to talk about the experience because of "the others--the ones who didn't make it." The meaning of this allusion escaped me at the time.

We began the interview in a private space. Following some casual chatting about classes, our mutual acquaintance, and so on, he signed the informed consent sheet and I turned on the tape recorder. About five minutes into the interview he asked me to turn the tape off. Offering an apology for the need to stop the interview, he explained that he had hurried to the interview from classes and that it would take a moment for him to move out of that hurried pace into the frame of mind where he could discuss his experience. He asked if he could play some music cassettes for a time, cassettes he had brought along with him (along with some poems he had written about the experience) because this particular music closely resembled the exquisite auditory quality that existed within his near-death experience. After some ten or fifteen minutes listening to this music together, discussing the particular melodic qualities that he found

relevant to his experience, he said he was ready to continue the interview.

We spent nearly three hours together. His comments oscillated between talk about portions of the near-death experience, about his current beliefs or confusions, and about his past efforts to discuss the experience with others. Though his physical crisis had been precipitated by an act of physical violence, he regarded his near-death experience as extremely positive and significant. This near-death experience had a strong auditory quality. "It was the most beautiful thing I could imagine. . . . the perfect tone maintained. . . . That sound drew you. I resisted it, I wanted to listen to it but I knew if I continued listening to it I would remain dead." He described the sound as the collection of all souls united, with each soul having its own sound.

The allusion on the telephone that I did not understand (the others who didn't make it) was a reference to a part of his near-death experience in which he was given the knowledge of people who "couldn't cross over." He added:

> I think that the worst thing you'd have to experience is that when you die you'd look back and see all the love that you didn't create, and that'd be all the purgatory you'd need at that moment of crossing over. . . . I would see hell as present-past because you're locked into it. I think some, if you want to call them souls, can't cross over because they can't get out of their past, they like go in cycles. And they're trapped in their guilt and they're unfulfilled.

Remembering those souls "gives me a sickening dead feeling." The beautiful sound, on the other hand, is a sound he longs to hear again. "It's very frustrating because it seems like I should be able to hear it. It seems like it's right outside my ear.... but I can't hear it."

Often during the interview occasion this individual carried the logical consequences of his experience into comments about 'this world.' "Time doesn't make any sense." "A lot of what I find logical in this world contradicts what I experienced." He described his yearning to return to the experience with these words:

> I'd love to go back. I'd love to commit suicide but you can't do it. I can't explain that either. I can't give a logical reason for it because I don't believe there's a God and you're interfering with his work or anything, the typical argument, but you can't commit suicide, even though I'd love to go back. . . . It's a contradiction because I want to live as long as possible but I want to go back there.

This young man further commented that the day before the interview he was quite elated about coming to talk with me. The morning of the interview, however, he felt "sick about it." At the end of the interview this man indicated his desire to meet another near-death experiencer (preferably someone his age) to 'look into their eyes and know they know what I know.' He also spoke of his wish to have further conversations with me.

This initial interview (and the two that followed) convinced me that decisions to discuss a near-death

experience are imbedded in a thicket of variables not easily anticipated. Some of my initial "best guesses" were missing the mark. Quite clearly, the interview was a mutually constructed event. This topic was an intimate one, and the relationship between us was exactly that--a relationship. If I focused on controlling the interaction, I would probably defeat my own research aims. For instance, in trying to answer my questions clearly, these individuals frequently embarked on an extended narrative about the physical crisis, about the content of the near-death experience, or about the dramatic change prompted by the experience. These digressions were made in order to uncover and contextualize for me the factors that had a direct bearing on the answer.

I detected other reasons for these narrations also. With attitudes that ranged from mild exasperation to patient good-humor, these early interviewees wanted to make sure I understood what was truly important about the experience. It seemed clear to them that an understanding of one consequence (disclosure habits) would be incomplete if I didn't also understand the deeper elements. Also, fidelity to the experience seemed to require fidelity to its <u>place</u> in their lives--both literally and metaphorically. In the second interview, for instance, a woman goodnaturedly persisted in her efforts to extend to me the wonder of living life with no fear of death.

Robust laughter was sprinkled throughout our time together, even though this individual was in pain and struggled with major health problems. These problems were caused by the brain injury and wounds of a car accident five years earlier. She gave me a copy of a poem about inner peace as a parting gift.

On the basis of these early interviews I began to suspect that a full understanding of these disclosure decisions required a willingness to become familiar with the particular content and quality of near-death experiences as well as other situational and motivational issues. A highly-structured question and answer format would not be likely to uncover these perspectives in depth and might obscure more than it would reveal. For example, I did detect traces of reluctance, as previous research had implied, but this reluctance was mingled with exuberant eagerness to talk about the experience.

In addition, I sensed that in talking about their near-death experience these individuals were not remembering an <u>event of the past</u> that was objectified and delimited. Rather, this happening was present to them still, in varying stages of intensity. It appeared that discussing this "presence" as if it were "absent" amounted to a profane act. I hypothesized that the young man's reported sense of eagerness to meet with me (before the first interview) was followed on the morning of the

interview by a nauseous feeling because of fear. He feared that in talking about the experience to a researcher in an "interview" it might become an "object of investigation," a shift that somehow betrayed the experience's nature and reality.

These initial interviews demonstrated for me that occasions for meeting with near-death experiencers offered fertile opportunities to participate in and observe directly disclosures about near-death experience while also gathering accounts about past disclosure motives and satisfactions. I shifted the emphasis of the opening moments of the interview occasion from the previous focus of "here's what I want to know" to "what do you want to tell me?" The specific area of my research was made known to these individuals before the interview, through oral or written descriptions. These were those which originally brought my research to their attention and the informed consent sheet.

Instead of directing the first stage of the interviews with a series of questions as I had with the initial three interviews, I decided to begin with a general remark such as "I don't recall the circumstances of your life-threatening episode" or "could you tell me about your experience?" Oten I chose not to use the term 'near-death experience' because it could not be expected to be so familiar to these individuals as to researchers

in the field. This amended opening offered the experiencers an opportunity to narrate the events in the way they chose, emphasizing what they wanted. In effect I increased the diversity of speech acts included in the interview setting. Expanding the interviews in this way provided the opportunity for a narrative performance. Following that excursion into their perspective, I inquired more specifically about subsequent disclosure interactions. I also expressed my willingness to answer their questions at the end of the interview. In this way the 'inquirer' role was exchanged. My methodology, then, became more fully an ethnographic methodology specifically because that was the most suitable and promising means of satisfying my research aims.

Ethnography

Ethnography, also called participant observation, falls under the domain of qualitative methodologies. Resembling the routine ways in which we gather information and make sense of the world, ethnography has a long history in social research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Ethnographic fieldwork is the mainstay of cultural anthropology where the central aim is to explore the "emic" point of view, to understand "what the world is like to people who have learned to see, hear, speak, think, and act in ways that are different" (Spradley, 1980, p. 3). As Spradley emphasizes, an ethnographer does

not study people themselves; an ethnographer learns from people their perspective about the world. The role of the ethnographic researcher differs markedly from that of a research tester, for example. An ethnographic research project "requires an intensive personal involvement, an abandonment of traditional scientific control, an improvisional style to meet situations not of the researcher's making, and an ability to learn from a long series of mistakes" (Agar, 1986, p. 12).

Prototypically, ethnographies focused on the study of primitive cultures or on life histories of individual members of such cultures. For several decades now, however, the purview of ethnographic methodology has expanded greatly. Recognizing the powerful contribution this method can offer to social science (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983), researchers in fields such as sociology, education, linguistics, and speech communication have embraced this methodology. Within the field of communication research, this trend corresponds to a shift from methodological monism to pluralism (Smith, 1988, pp. 314-315).

Ethnography aims more at understanding than prediction of behavior, partly because it chooses to emphasize the powerful role that meaning and context occupy in human activity and partly because it does not choose sampling techniques that aim at statistical

prediction. Ethnography is not, however, divorced from theory. Developing theory and verifying the validity of existing theory are two primary objectives of ethnographic methodology. Moreover, a theory includes "reference to mechanisms or processes by which the relationship among variables identified is generated" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 20). Ethnographers examine social processes in contexts where the beliefs that purportedly govern behavior can be articulated and noted. An ethnographic researcher looks for both 'what' and 'why'; thus enthography functions as a heuristic procedure in the process of theory development.

The notion, sometimes espoused by naturalistic researchers, that someone can shed all presuppositions and enter 'the field' as a naive observer is ill-founded. The wise ethnographer prepares for fieldwork, not by some attempt to shed prior understandings, but by exposing these understandings as fully as possible (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). A thorough literature review supports this process of making known prior theoretical understandings and expectations. By reflexively examining these formal understanding as well as her or his own informal understandings, the researcher's critical faculties are supposed to be raised to a level of alertness that encourages recognition of both the fulfillment and violation of expectations. Ethnographic

research, then, always begins with a set of issues, problems, or partial understandings.

Ethnographic methodology offers researchers unique opportunities to compare theoretical understandings with everyday activities and to compare self-reports with observed behavior. When initial expectations are fulfilled, that fulfillment is important information. When initial expectations are violated, an ethnographer regards these violations as important pieces of information as well. Violations, then, inform the research process and shape theoretical formulation. For instance, the literature review in this study (Chapter 2) was greatly expanded beyond its initial boundaries when disclosure findings in communication theory failed to account for activity and attitudes favoring secrecy that I encountered during my interview and fieldwork investigations.

I then began an extensive literature search for insight into the functions of secrecy. This search led me into the areas of privacy regulation in psychology and law, and into the fields of depth psychology and therapeutic counseling. In those research areas I was able to locate theory that could account more closely for the behavior I observed. This data-driven "back to the theoretical drawing board" process is one of the strengths of ethnography because this method offers researchers the

flexibility to extend or modify existing theory through faithfulness to observed behavior.

In addition to interviews, I began to accept and extend invitations, on a limited basis, that put me in further contact with some of these experiencers after the interview was completed. On several occasions I was able to be present when they disclosed their near-death experience to others in a group setting. Those occasions, though not large in number, provided additional opportunities to compare the disclosure behavior within the interview with disclosure behavior I observed outside the interview setting.

As ethnographers have long recognized, the problem of gaining access to the necessary data is more than a practical issue (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). The discovery and removal of obstacles that block access is in itself valuable data. Within this study, my research depended on locating and successfully completing interviews with fifty individuals in the southern Louisiana region who claimed to have near-death experiences during a life-threatening crisis. In effect, this access process had two challenges: how to bring news of my research to the attention of individuals who had near-death experiences, and what would be required to gain their permission for a research interview. This latter challenge was a discovery of the means to secure a

disclosure from near-death experiencers about their extraordinary happening. Toward that end, I took care to document and vary my efforts to publicize my research. Furthermore, when an individual did choose to contact me about my research, I inquired by what means she or he had come to know of my research project.

While they have the potential to make strong and unique contributions to theory, ethnographic studies do not form the basis for making the kinds of statistical claims typically found with quantitative studies. This research project is not a prospective study as Sabom and Ring had conducted. Those researchers, in hoping to ascertain how frequently near-death experiences occurred to persons near death, located and interviewed individuals who had come close to death without revealing their research interest in the near-death experience beforehand.

In the current study, my interest was to meet with people who had a near-death experience. Self-referrals and referrals by others played their necessary role in the selection process. Consequently, the relationship between this group of individuals who agreed to be interviewed and the larger population of "near-death experiencers" is a problematic one. Although descriptive quantifiers may at times be used within this study, in no way are these to be considered claims about the larger population of near-death experiencers.

Within the field of near-death experience research, this problem of representativeness remains a haunting question. Specifically because all information about near-death experiences comes as a result of a decision to self-disclose, researchers cannot claim to know the experience itself, nor even a representative sample of the population of near-death experiencers.

It is precisely this limitation that looms large in answering queries about distressing near-death experiences, for instance. The fact that few reports of distressing near-death experiences have entered the research literature does not necessarily mean that such experiences are relatively rare. Near-death researchers accept this research limitation because it remains a necessary constraint in researching this topic. This problem is an ubiquitous one in social science, since all research based on self-report is actually research into disclosure claims and accounts.

I do make specific efforts to provide external validity by administering two research instruments at the end of the interview. Those procedures are discussed in the section that follows.

Ethnographic Interview

The primary occasions or means for investigating this topic are extensive interviews. "The long interview is one of the most powerful methods in the qualitative

armory," reports McCracken (1988, p. 9). As speech events governed by specific communicative rules, interviews are dialogic and mutually-constructed encounters. The need to provide answers to questions, or at least relevant responses, shapes the interaction most powerfully. As Briggs (1986) writes, "interviews are quite complex and multifaceted speech events. Their communicative properties are highly reflective of the specific type of interview and of the relationship that is established between the involved parties" (p. 18). Treating the interviewees' responses as direct reflections of their thoughts is a questionable judgment. All disclosure processes are jointly constructed speech events.

These research interviews function as a type of disclosure. All disclosures are constrained and shaped by a multitude of forces. Rather than presuming that there exists an objective, unconstrained disclosure event that is "real," I will, in fact, presume that the disclosures embedded in these interviews must be examined--as all disclosure events must be examined--with an eye ever open to the "subtle and intricate intersection of factors that converge to form a particular interview" (Briggs, 1986, p. 22).

When I modified the interview process so that the near-death experiencers began with their narrative, I enhanced the options for the interview itself to function

as an occasion of disclosure in progress. I was able to participate in that disclosure as a selected listener; I was the common thread running through all these disclosure occasions. While watching the near-death experiencers grapple with the many choices of sequence, tone, nonverbal activity, and so on, I gained added insight into the nature of the disclosure act. I added inquiries that would elaborate on the ways in which the interview was similar or distinct from other disclosure contexts: Why did you agree to meet with me? Was the interview satisfying? How did the interaction in the interview differ or compare with other disclosures?

In effect, the interviews became occasions where many speech acts converged: getting acquainted, signing informed consent forms (respondents sometimes commented about this 'giving permission' event), narrative performance, specific responses to specific questions, reversing roles when the interviewee questioned the interviewer, filling out the questionnaire together, bidding farewell.

Metacommunicative remarks often reveal frames and index interviewee perspectives. Such remarks were offered spontaneously at varied points: during the phone call when the interview appointment was made, in the midst of the interview occasion, or in subsequent conversations.

All 50 individuals were interviewed privately and the interviews were audiotape recorded. Before the tape recorder was turned on, a consent form was presented to the individual to be signed. This consent form assured the individual of confidentiality and anonymity, described the research focus, and explained the individual's right to withdraw at any time. After securing written permission, I began taping our conversation.

Every effort was made to participate in the interview in an unhurried pace. Each individual was encouraged, at the beginning of the interview, to elaborate fully about his or her life-threatening crisis. Interruptions of this narration were kept to a minimum, and consisted mainly of requests for clarification and expressions of engagement in the narrative. Once the individual had discussed the life-threatening crisis and the near-death experience within that crisis, I began to make more specific inquiries about disclosure motives and decisions. Appendix B lists the pool of questions from which I drew my inquiries. These questions were not posed exhaustively. Crisis particulars varied greatly with the consequence that some lines of inquiry were more applicable for a specific crisis experience than other queries. For example, when an individual had never spoken of his or her near-death experience in any depth before the research interview, questions about reasons for not

disclosing held greater prominence than questions about satisfactions with previous disclosure events. Also, long interviews are intellectually and emotionally demanding (McCracken, 1988); at all times the individual's well-being was the decisive factor. Those demands affect the interviewer as well. McCracken (1988) reported that when he proposed long interviews with individuals between ages 65 and 75, both he and the funding agency feared that the respondents might be "dangerously taxed by the experience of answering intimate questions over a long period" (p. 27). McCracken continued:

> Our fears proved unfounded. Almost without exception, respondents proved more durable and energetic than their interviewer. Again and again, I was left clinging to consciousness and my tape recorder as the interview was propelled foward by respondent enthusiasm. Something in the interview process proved so interesting and gratifying that it kept replenishing respondent energy and involvement.

After I finished asking about past disclosure situations and about their reasons for agreeing to the interview, I turned the tape recorder off and offered to answer any questions the individual wanted to pose to me. Then I asked the individual to complete a few pages of questions. Some general demographic data was gathered (see Appendix C) as well as information about communication habits and experience quality (Appendix D). Finally, each individual was asked to complete Ring's Weighted Core Experience Index (WCEI) (Ring, 1982) (see Appendix E) as well as Greyson's NDE SCALE (1983a) (see

Appendix F) as a means of establishing external validity.

The WCEI was developed by Ring during his pioneering scientific study in the late 1970s for two purposes: to measure the intensity of reported experiences, and to devise a means of distinguishing between this experience and similar phenomena. He selected the items on this scale before his data collection and based his choices on the extensive clinical evidence assembled by Moody (1975, 1977). The WCEI had face validity and was a useful first instrument, although its discriminative validity for identifying NDEs among unselected individuals was found to be weak (Greyson, 1983a).

Greyson's NDE SCALE was developed through systematic data analysis. Its internal consistency has been demonstrated (Cronbach's coefficient alpha is .88) and a test-retest procedure found a relability coefficient of .92. In addition, Greyson's instrument was found to have face validity and criterion validity (through comparisons with the WCEI and with the criterion sample). Greyson reports that the NDE Scale successfully discriminated near-death experiences from other similar experiences (1983a, pp. 57-58). Ring's WCEI Index is recommended for quantifying depth of a near-death experience, while Greyson's NDE SCALE is more valid for screening a population in order to identify near-death experiences (Greyson, 1983a).

Summary

This study is an examination of disclosure decisions and interactions in which near-death experiencers reveal (or consider revealing) their first-hand account of this extraordinary happening. At all times three research questions served to guide this investigation:

1) Whom do these persons talk with about their near-death experience?

2) What variables mediate the decision to disclose or not disclose the nature of the near-death experience?

3) What variables govern the evaluation of the telling experience as satisfying or dissatisfying?

The core of this research design consists of fifty long interviews with individuals who claim to have near-death experiences. Efforts to locate and meet with these individuals comprise important fieldwork data. Administration of two near-death experience scales at the end of the interviews add a measure of external validity that the reported experience conforms to research findings about near-death experience. Initial interviews with near-death experiencers demonstrated that the interview occasion could function as a rich opportunity to participate in and observe such disclosures in progress. Moreover, additional opportunities for fieldwork are possible through continued association with some

individuals after the interview and through contact with other near-death experiencers following formal presentations in the community. The complexity of the disclosure decision was also demonstrated within intial interviews. In view of these complexities and research opportunities, an ethnographic methodology offers the greatest promise for providing authentic insight into this research topic.

Ethnography, also called participant observation, has been the foundational methodology in the field of cultural anthropology for many years. Recently, this methodology has emerged as a research tool in fields like sociology, education, linguistics, and speech communication. Ethnography is most useful when opportunities for participation and observation exist that offer the researcher insight into individual perspectives. Ethnography supports both theory development and verification of validity of existing theory. In strengthening the connection between theory and observed behavior, ethnography seeks to extend ecological validity to theoretical claims.

Evidence is gathered to demonstrate content conformity between this group of near-death experiencers and other groups that were prospectively gathered. However, ethnographic methodology does not provide the means for statistical prediction.

CHAPTER FIVE

LOCATING NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCERS

Introduction

Ethnographic investigations historically focus on established communities of persons. In such instances, the initial stage of fieldwork involves gaining entry into the group of interacting individuals. The investigator typically begins as an outsider who will move into the community to observe and participate in ongoing activity. In other cases, ethnographers choose to study individuals who are identified by observable and behavioral features that provide a strong thread of continuity across individual context. In both these types of ethnographic research, identifying the members of the focus group, though informative, is essentially unproblematic.

The current study, like previous ethnographic investigations, chooses to explore a perspective by following the common thread of experience across individual cases. Unlike most ethnographies, however, this study does not study a community of interacting individuals. Furthermore, the common thread does not consist of observable behavior. The common thread that distinguishes the persons in this study arises from an experience that leaves no telltale, residual marking. Identifying these individuals is highly problematic

precisely because self-disclosure provides the only road to that identification.

Locating individuals to include in this research group involved the process of tracking down myriad trails of self-disclosure and disseminating information about this project in a way that invited self-identification. Because self-disclosure about one's near-death experience comprises the primary emphasis in this study, the challenge of locating near-death experiencers functioned not simply as an obstacle to be surmounted, but as an informative part of the research project. When investigating self-disclosure concerning extremely delicate issues, the discovery of obstacles helps to clarify the perceived risk of self-disclosure and to illuminate the landscape of privacy. As a means of documenting and extracting extra-interview evidence about self-disclosure decisions, I recorded metacommunicative comments individuals made regarding their decisions to meet with me.

Fieldwork preparation and completion required approximately 18 months. In the beginning months, my energies were concentrated on reading and re-reading near-death experience information from a variety of fields. I then planned the pool of questions that would guide my interview queries. Locating near-death experiencers and

completing individual research interviews with them spanned a period of twelve months.

In this chapter I detail efforts to locate near-death experiencers in the local urban area and describe the research occasions in which I interacted with them. In addition, I provide some basic demographic profiles for this research group and furnish information about their near-death experiences including Ring's (1982), Greyson's (1983a), and Sabom's (1982) classifications.

Seeking Respondents

Previous research firmly established that near-death experiences occur to persons from a wide cross-section of society with no demographic variables predisposing an individual for this happening (Ring, 1982). The life-threatening crisis could have been triggered by an illness, suicide attempt, or accident (Ring, 1982). Because I wanted a broad cross-section of respondents, I decided to choose a variety of avenues for disseminating news of my research and my plans to interview near-death experiencers.

Several criteria served to guide my decision to include someone's narrative in my research group. First, the experience must fit the general patterns noted in the research literature as a vivid encounter with an extramundane dimension of reality. Second, the experience must have occurred during a life-threatening physical

crisis. I relied on the individual to make this determination. Third, the experience must be a first-hand account, clearly recalled rather than indirectly inferred. These criteria served to eliminate a number of calls I received in which the speaker wanted to relay the experience of another, offered to decribe a happening much like a near-death experience but not co-occurring with a physical crisis, or expressed interest in the topic without recall of an experience.

In early 1990, I began to speak openly of my plan to meet with near-death experiencers to colleagues, friends, and acquaintances. Gradually, as news of my research focus spread, opportunities arose to speak about near-death experiences to groups in the local community. Between May 1990 and May 1991, I made eight presentations on this topic in the local area. Of these eight, two presentations were to college classes: a psychology class at Southern University and a religious studies class at Louisiana State University. On four occasions I spoke to various church-affiliated groups: Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Catholic. I also offered an in-service workshop to Hospice Foundation personnel. I took a brief handout (Appendix A) with me to the earlier presentations which included a description of my research topic and my request to meet with near-death experiencers face-to-face. My home telephone number was included in this handout. Brief

articles about my project appeared in regional news media, South Baton Rouge Journal and LSU Today. Also in the early months of fieldwork my research description was printed in the bulletins of two local Catholic churches and in the staff bulletin of a local hospital.

Six months into the interview year, I contacted the local city newspaper, The Morning Advocate, and asked to speak to a reporter who covered university research. After securing a pledge from him that the article would be written as research coverage, I spoke with this reporter at length about my research and provided my telephone number for the article. Lengthy articles describing my project as professional research appeared in the afternoon paper of December 3, 1990 and the morning paper of December 4, 1990. Within five days I received sixty-three telephone calls. I ultimately interviewed twenty-eight of these people.

Of the 50 interviews that I completed, 41 individuals contacted me directly after learning of my research and 37 of these were the result of reading a written description of my project. I initiated contact with 9 experiencers, typically after being given their names by friends, colleagues, or acquaintances. Naturally, when an individual chose to contact me directly after learning about my research, no intervening disclosures were

necessary. This particular avenue of contact, then, provided a thorough measure of privacy.

I wanted to incorporate some respect for the privacy of individuals whose names were imparted to me by others. To honor their privacy as much as possible, I requested assurance from the intervening persons that the individual was indeed willing to be contacted by me for a research interview. Most often I inquired, 'Has this individual given you permission to pass her or his name on to me?' During my initial telephone contact with these individuals, I mentioned the identity of the person who had provided their name and number to me, and verified their willingness for contact with me. Each of these individuals agreed to a subsequent interview.

The early interviews required considerably more investigative and publicizing work than the later ones, because the newspaper article midway through the interview year brought so many calls at once. Eighteen interviews had been completed before the newspaper article, and I had nearly exhausted my leads at that point in time.

Occasionally persons questioned me about related topics before revealing their own identity as an experiencer. Looking back on the first part of those particular conversations, that portion that preceded the disclosure seemed to function as a test. I recorded these and other clues to disclosure decision-making in my

fieldwork notebook. These bits of evidence supplemented the metacommunicative comments and insights gleaned from the interview interactions. Taken together, extra-interview remarks about disclosure, disclosure activity within the interview, and metacommunicative comments during the interview occasion formed a network of data. This network shaped working hypotheses about disclosure variables through a dynamic process of corroboration, refutation, or elaboration.

Research Occasions

During this study, I refer to the overall crisis narrative as a whole at times while distinguishing, at other times, between those portions which recount the physical crises and those which describe extramundane happenings. For the sake of clarity, the following distinctions apply. 'Crisis narrative' is used to refer to the entire narrative including description of physical crisis and near-death experience. 'Danger-of-death' or 'physical crisis' narrative refers only to the description of physical crisis within the entire narrative. 'Near-death experience' or 'extramundane' narrative refers to the description of that portion of the crisis event which the individual claims occurred in a realm of reality beyond the body.

Interviews. Individual interviews formed the nexus of my research interactions with these 50 near-death

experiencers. Typically, each experiencer and I spent two hours together. Some interviews were closer to one hour in length, and one interview extended beyond four hours. After the tape recorder was turned off, we spent time completing a brief questionnaire that included Ring's Weighted Core Experience Index and Greyson's Near-Death Experience Scale. I also offered to answer any questions that the individuals wanted to ask me.

Early in the project, I arranged the interviews to occur in my home or office locale, or in the experiencer's home. For those later interviews that resulted from calls following the newspaper article, I usually reserved a private room in a local library.

The average lapse of time between the near-death experience and the interview was 16.22 years. Despite the passage of time, however, these extramundane happenings were recalled with what appeared to be (and was claimed to be) astounding clarity and with a profound sense of awe.

Talking about one's near-death experience may have heightened emotional quality in part because the experience is nested within a narrative about extreme physical crisis that brought the individual to the very edge of life and death. Precipitating physical crises varied greatly. These accounts of physical crisis varied in tone from high to low emotionality.

Together the memory of acute physical crisis and the memory of one's extramundane near-death experience forms a whole cloth. The physical distress stands in sharp contrast to the near-death experience's profound peace however. For nearly all these experiencers there is a definite seam delineating the two aspects of the one fabric. As one man stated, the distinction between the two "worlds" is clear.

Danger-of-death episodes generally involve a large, but exhaustible, number of facts or event-sequences. Describing these factual event-sequences follows this general contour: ordinary day or situation, shift into physical crisis, details of who, what, when, where, how, and in what order. Describing one's extramundane experience, on the other hand, is not typically dominated by such details. Extensive autoscopic episodes during near-death experiences lend themselves more easily to event-sequence description than transcendent elements. Unless a near-death experience is primarily autoscopic, then, an event-sequence descriptive approach may obscure more than it reveals. As one woman said about her transcendent near-death experience,

> It's like the experience just was there, and it was--completeness. And I might talk about different aspects of it, but, I don't know that I remember one aspect of it more than any of the others. It didn't have length...it had depth.

An event-sequence approach, then, may mask layers of profundity, yet it is exactly this manner of talking about happenings that seems to fulfill our expectations of narrative.

One event will illustrate this point directly. Among the individuals I interviewed were a wife and husband who had near-death experiences 27 years apart. Some time after our interviews, these two individuals accompanied me to a presentation where they each talked about their near-death experience to a group of approximately 70 persons. The wife's experience combined both autoscopic (outside her body witnessing events and people) and transcendent elements. The husband's experience involved transcendent elements only.

During her descriptions to this audience, the wife elaborated in great detail the events she witnessed during the autoscopic part of her near-death experience. Indeed her case involved some quite remarkable and lengthy autoscopic sequences. Sixteen minutes passed between the time she was declared dead and the moment when her body moved again. During those moments of apparent death she had extensive opportunities to witness events, both in the hospital and elsewhere. These happenings can all be related as event-sequences similar to our typical expectation of a story. During this presentation, the woman made little reference to the transcendent elements

which I had previously talked about with her during the interview.

When the husband described his near-death experience the narrative was brief and seemed cursory in contrast to his wife's. For example, he said that after his near-death experience 'I still don't know what my purpose in life is, but now I know I'm doing it.' Following this presentation, my husband (who was in the audience) commented 'Well, she really had an intense experience compared to his.' In point of fact on Ring's Weighted Core Experience Index, the scale designed to measure depth of near-death experience, the husband had scored 22/29 while the wife scored 21/29. These are both very high scores, but because the husband's experience involved transcendent elements only there was less opportunity to convey the power and content of this experience within the frame of an "event-sequence" format. It is also possible that transcendent elements are considered to be matters of greater intimacy. I knew, from what transpired between us during our earlier interviews, that both of these individuals omitted much from their presentation that they had previously shared with me about the powerful transcendent aspects.

An event-sequence manner of approaching near-death experience narratives is far from exhaustive. At times, this kind of approach may even create a false impression

by omitting much that the experiencer considers integral to a full understanding of her or his experience.

Respondents first broached the subject of their extramundane happening within the interview through one of several patterns. For a number of individuals, the danger-of-death narrative was preceded with metacomments about the experience. In these cases the individuals emphasized the advantage of hindsight. For example, several persons prefaced their narratives with acknowledgement that their current understanding about this happening [that an extramundane event is a common occurrence when death is imminent] was not available to them until long after the events had occurred. Necessarily, then, a shroud of mystery permeated their earliest reactions to this extraordinary happening. A few had suppressed the memory, only to find the recall surfacing with great power when they first came across a written or television report about near-death experiences. One man, who recalled over twenty near-death experiences, began his interview by explaining that the seriousness of his cardiac condition was not diagnosed until after sixteen years of "spells" during which his heart would stop beating for nearly two minutes. Some individuals brought medical records, autobiographic entries, poems, and short stories they had written about their near-death experience. References to this documentation might

introduce the narrative. These various kinds of prefaces were followed eventually by accounts of the physical crisis.

At other times, individuals used a second kind of narrative pattern. They began directly with the physical crisis narrative and completed describing the danger-of-death events without any reference to an extramundane occurrence in the sequence of events. Within this kind of narrative pattern the individual, often in response to a query from me, doubled-back and picked up the thread, placing the near-death experience into its sequential place as closely as possible. Sometimes, as in the case of prolonged periods of unconsciousness when the near-death experience was not linked to any physical sequence through immediate awakening or autoscopic observation, the exact timing of the near-death experience was unknown.

Most often, individuals structured crisis narratives in which the extramundane happening was introduced in the sequence at the point it occurred. Regardless of the mode of narrative approach, eventually the individual came [or returned] to the point in the physical crisis where the extramundane happening occurred. In the midst of the danger-of-death sequence, then, came references to an extramundane experience that <u>visited</u> them, unexpected and unbidden.

As the number of completed interviews grew, I noticed that it was possible to talk about one's near-death experience on several levels. Some individuals plunged into describing profound and textured elements of their near-death experience without hesitation. In so doing, they circled through the various levels, discussing events, describing feelings, explicating meaning, expounding the significance of even small details of this happening. For instance, the full significance of a detail might require a narrative sidetrack in which the individual situated that element in her or his psychological, spiritual, or personality history in order to place it honestly in a landscape of meaning.

Such a circumambulation often confounded event-sequence logic, but was apparently an attempt to be faithful to the experience's timeless and true nature as an encounter with self, with truth, and with numinous reality. It seemed in these moments they were re-experiencing the tremendous power of that encounter. I found that I was drawn along into an ambiance of luminous and peace-filled quiet. Even after my exhaustive reading about near-death experiences, I was not prepared for the beauty and power of these moments. A look of surprised wonder sat in the teller's eyes. I detected an orientation of awe, betokening an encounter with gratuitous benevolence and beloved presence. Attempts to

describe this directly invariably brought moistness to the eye and silence to the tongue. We sat, the two of us, caught up in a powerful silence together. I knew that these individuals had encountered numinous reality as Rudolph Otto had defined it in his famous book The Idea of the Holy (1958): an inexpressible, mysterious, terrifying, directly experienced, wholly other, divine manifestation. And somehow, within the interview situation, that power was once again active and present.

Other individuals began with a capsulated version of near-death experience narrative, mentioning event sequences without commentary as if "just the facts" were of importance to me. Within the interview, if an individual began describing their near-death experience in a "facts-only, events-sequence" manner, I had several options. I could continue the interview on that level, waiting to see if the speaker initiated reference to other elements like affective quality, meaning, or impact of this extramundane happening. If later references to these aspects were made by the speaker, I had the option to pursue them or not. I could also return the conversation to aspects of the extramundane happening where I could attempt to create such a shift myself.

As I became more experienced as a listener to these narratives, I came to understand that oblique references functioned as apertures, accessible junctures through

which the conversation could shift into deeper perspectives if I recognized the significance of the allusion and responded to it as an invitation. Many near-death experiencers began their telling on the event-sequence level and proceeded to deeper levels where affect, meaning, or significance were introduced only after subtle expressions of willingness were actively pursued by me. I began to observe and untangle that curious mixture of reluctance and eagerness noted briefly by other researchers.

Occasionally these apertures surfaced after the tape recorder was turned off, while the individual was completing Ring's Weighted Core Index and Greyson's Near-Death Experience Scales. Often I would express surprise if in those inventories the individual marked positive responses to particular elements that had not been mentioned during their earlier narrative. At other times, the questions on the inventories would stimulate memories of elements that the individual had forgotten or had never conceptualized directly. For some respondents then, these moments after the tape recorder was turned off became opportunities in which they explored deeper elements from their near-death happening. The questions on the scales prompted specific and further reflection about the experience's content, emotional tenor, and noetic elements.

Also, turning the tape recorder off occasionally sparked greater candor. Especially for those individuals who had been circumspect in making claims about the experience's meaning during the interview, this candor brought a kind of freedom in which they could stress personal certainty, based on first-hand experience. A few used this opportunity to emphasize that in their own minds certainty had been established about life after death, although they did not expect their experience to constitute irrefutable evidence for others.

Following the crisis narrative portion of the interview, I began a long series of queries into subsequent disclosure decisions and situations. In this section of the interview, quite lengthy in itself, we discussed particular interactions in which this individual had revealed or considered revealing their near-death experience to another. For instance, each person who had disclosed this experience to several others was asked to recall specifically the disclosure situation that was most satisfying, as well as the one that was most dissatisfying. I found that it helped to ask them to take a moment and recall the context specifically before answering questions. All of these discussions of disclosure motive, interaction, and satisfaction were part of the tape-recorded interview.

At each interview's end, I consistently offered to answer any questions the respondent wanted to ask me after the tape recorder was turned off. About one third of the respondents had no questions to ask me at all. Frequently I was asked how I first became interested in this topic, what I planned to do with the information, how they might read my findings, if I had ever had a near-death experience myself. Some wanted more information about near-death experiences and wanted to know to what extent their experience was consonant with the reports of others. A few asked that I contact them about my findings or about opportunities to meet other near-death experiencers in the local area.

After all the interviews were completed, each interview audiotape was duplicated and transcribed. With the exception of some narrative outtakes and other comments not directly bearing on the topic, each interview tape was transcribed fully. The resulting transcriptions numbered 282 single-spaced pages.

Other research occasions. As mentioned above, interviews comprised the primary research forum for this study about disclosure of near-death experiences. A few additional research opportunities presented themselves when near-death experiencers accompanied me to presentations in the community as illustrated above when a husband and wife talked about their near-death

experiences. In addition to these, serendipitous occasions occasionally presented themselves in which I was given additional insight into disclosure processes.

One such instance occurred early in my interview year when I unexpectedly found myself at a social gathering with someone I had recently interviewed. This interaction alerted me to benefits of secrecy I had not previously considered. Secrecy is often regarded negatively in disclosure and psychological research. This occasion persuaded me, early in my interview year, that I had assumed a biased and limited view of secrecy in beginning my investigation of disclosure decisions. I observed that secrecy had the potential to nourish as well as drain. Secrecy, like disclosure, is a context-embedded and multifacted domain of human communication. After this conversation, I began to observe more closely and inquire more objectively about secrecy during subsequent interviews.

Demographic and Descriptive Profiles

Each connection between myself and a near-death experiencer had its own story, its own account of how initial contact was made and how the decision to meet with me was reached. At times, experiencers commented on the serendipitous nature of that connection and their willingness to invest such seeming coincidences with respect. Several men revealed that they came at the

urging of their wives. Though I hoped that my contact efforts would result in a wide cross-section of persons, I recognized that ultimately the composition of the research group was governed by decisions of individual near-death experiencers to meet with me.

This group of 50 individuals came from diverse backgrounds. As the profiles below indicate, I was fortunate to meet with adults of all ages, ranging from 21 to 72. Their educational levels varied from Ph.D. to less than a high school diploma. Occupations varied broadly and included the following: dentist, sheriff, janitor, engineer, teachers, skilled laborers, nurses, counselors, barber, accountants, homemakers, writers, retired FBI agent, office workers, and minister.

At the end of my research year, I gathered together descriptive and demographic information I had collected during the interview occasions. These descriptive profiles follow.

There were 24 men and 26 women who participated in this study. Except for one black person, all participants were white. The precipitating physical crises included: illness (33), accident (12), violent attack (4), and suicide attempt (1). The average number of years of formal education was 15.3. The range extended from 7 years to 23 years of education, with a standard deviation of 3.14 years.

Included in the demographic data collected at interview's conclusion was church affiliation and church attendance. While 6 individuals stated they were affiliated with no church, 24 indicated an affiliation with the Catholic Church and 18 mentioned an affiliation with a Protestant denomination. One experiencer reported association with an Indian spiritual teacher, and another experiencer reported being "in transition" with regards to church affiliation.

Participants were asked to circle the best response for frequency of church attendance from the following four options: none, less than monthly, 1-3 times a month, and weekly. Weekly attendance was indicated by 22 experiencers, 1-3 times a month was chosen by 8, less than monthly was circled 11 times, and finally, 9 experiencers reported they never attended church.

Within this study I restricted my research to interviews with adults. Respondents came from a wide cross-section of age ranges. While the average age was 49.56 years, the range extended from 21 years to 72 years with a standard deviation of 11.8 years. The distribution across age ranges follows: ages 20-29 (2), ages 30-39 (9), ages 40-49 (15), ages 50-59 (13), ages 60-69 (7), and ages 70-79 (4).

Near-Death Experience Profiles

While the preceding section presented descriptive information about the 50 near-death experiencers who comprised this research group, this section provides various descriptive profiles about the near-death experiences they reported. Key emphasis in this section will be measures and profiles detailing experience content.

A primary rationale for presenting this information arises from the need to be as fully descriptive as possible about the experiences on which my subsequent analysis will be based. In addition, several specific aspects of near-death experience content were offered by these individuals as factors that influenced their disclosure decisions. This section, then, highlights those features that will be referred to more fully during subsequent analysis.

While one experiencer reported a near-death experience of distressing quality, all other near-death experiences were reported to be uplifting events that ranged from deeply peaceful to ecstatically blissful.

Descriptions of out-of-body sequences during a single physical crisis were counted as a single near-death experience. However, if an individual reported an extramundane happening during separate physical crisis

episodes, I viewed these reports as separate near-death experiences.

Four individuals reported more than one near-death experience to me during our interview. In one case, the individual had over 20 near-death experiences from an undiagnosed cardiac condition between the ages of 10 and 26. A second individual report near-death experiences during each of two childbirth-related medical crises. A third person reported experiences at ages 4, 16, and 39 from illness or accidents. Finally, a fourth individual reported near-death experiences from two separate accidents at ages 3 and 21.

The Weighted Core Experience Index (WCEI) was developed in 1980 to measure depth of near-death experience by Ring (1982). Scores may range from 0 (lowest) to 29. In Ring's initial study, the highest score obtained was 24. For the purposes of his initial study, Ring considered a score above 9 to indicate a deep near-death experience. A score of 6-9 was assigned the classification moderate. Wanting to be conservative in creating his original sample, Ring excluded scores under 6 from his subsequent analytic reports.

I administered the WCEI to each respondent at the end of our interview. In the present research group, 88% (44/50) of WCEI scores qualified as deep near-death experiences with scores above 9. Among these 44 cases, 4

individuals scored above 24 on the WCEI. In three cases, individuals scored below 6. The remaining three cases scored between 6 and 9. Mean WCEI score for this group was 16.72. Scores ranged from 4 to 29, with a standard deviation of 6.00.

Following the development of Ring's Weighted Core Experience Index, Greyson (1983a) designed the Near-Death Experience Scale. While the WCEI is recommended to quantify depth of NDE reports, the Near-Death Experience Scale is advised for screening a population to identify NDEs. Possible scores range from 0 (lowest) to 32. For example, clinicians may use this instrument to discriminate between near-death experiences and other reports associated with "organic brain syndromes and non-specific stress responses following close brushes with death" (Greyson, 1983a, p. 375). Minimum score recommendation varies with research purpose. A score of 7 or higher should include 84% of positive cases, assuming normal distribution of scores for persons having near-death experiences. Working with 67 individuals who believed they had near-death experiences, Greyson found the mean score to be 15.01, range reported to be 2 - 31, and standard deviation was 7.84.

Each participants in this study completed Greyson's Near-Death Experience Scale at the end of our interview.

Scores ranged from 2 to 27, with a mean score of 14.46 and standard deviation of 6.25. Out of the group of 50 experiencers, 44 completed this scale with scores of 7 or higher. Scores between 2 and 4 were reported for 3 cases, and scores of 5 - 6 were found for another 3 cases.

In his landmark hospital study, Sabom (1982) found it helpful to group near-death experiences into three categories: autoscopic, transcendent, and combined. Autoscopic is the term used to describe that kind of near-death experience in which one's physical body and surroundings are viewed from a point of view outside the body. Transcendent describes those elements in which realms beyond the physical are experienced, but visual access to physical surroundings absent. Sabom used combined to classify those near-death experience reports that included both autoscopic and transcendent elements.

During interviews, I noted that references to the features delineated in Sabom's categorization scheme surfaced during respondents' descriptions of disclosure decisions. No scale exists for these categorizations. Using interview transcriptions, I grouped the reported experiences into these three categories. In four cases, individuals reported only autoscopic near-death experiences. For 21 individuals, their near-death experience report included only transcendent elements.

The remaining 25 participants reported experiences that combined autoscopic and transcendent elements.

Summary

Recognizing that the process of locating individuals functioned as a richly informative part of this research project, this chapter detailed that process. While previous research had established that near-death experiencers occur to persons from a wide cross-section of society, local near-death experiencers must, at a minimum, receive news of this research project before a meeting was possible. Within this chapter, I describe in detail my efforts to locate potential respondents and my criteria for including a report in this research group. Also included in this chapter is a discussion of contact processes through which these 50 individuals and I were put in touch with one another.

In a discussion of research occasions, I outlined constitutive aspects of research interviews. These 50 interviews formed the essential core of this project. I also depicted the range of rhythm and flavor that characterized those interviews. A brief description of research occasions outside the interview setting followed.

After completing interviews with 50 near-death experiencers, I gathered descriptive information about this research group and about the content of their near-death experiences. These profiles were presented in this

chapter in a further attempt to be as fully descriptive as possible about the material that functioned as key resource for this project.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCLOSURE DECISIONS AND PATTERNS

Introduction

Due to the near-death experience's nature, no other person can know of its happening except through disclosure. Throughout the interviews and my subsequent study of the interview transcripts, I remained open to the possibility that the action of disclosing such intimate material to another person might serve goals beyond the transmission of information. Indeed, disclosures like these may signal shifts in one's relationship to the heretofore private experience, and in this way assume important symbolic meaning.

I found that the individuals who met with me gave a great deal of thought to their disclosure decisions, as will be evident from some of the excerpts below. Obviously, the disclosure interaction was the subject of reflection, monitoring, and--in many cases--caution.

Disclosure expands the boundaries within which the experience is harbored. Essentially, disclosure moves the experience from an inner sanctum where one's assertion of its reality can be privately held to the interactional world where its reality may be contested. Even if one discloses to only one other person, one's control ceases to be absolute. These disclosure decisions are not

trivial matters. The interviews reveal that considerable thought is typically given to them.

Given the shift represented by disclosure decisions and the subject matter of the disclosure, it would seem reasonable that one would take steps to disclose for only the strongest of motives. I discussed disclosure motives at length with each near-death experiencer and studied their responses closely. Also during the interviews, we discussed the evolution of disclosure habits over time. I asked each respondent to reconstruct the initial disclosure events for me and to sketch any trends in their disclosure habits between initial disclosure and the time of the interview. Together we explored the effects of various factors upon their disclosure decisions. The relative depth of disclosure merited our attention as well.

In this chapter I present the results of my inquiries about disclosure decisions and patterns in five sections. First, I examine disclosure motives and present five motive clusters that seemed to fuel disclosure attempts. Next, I examine disclosure patterns including both a specific section dedicated to initial disclosure interactions and a longitudinal view of disclosure trends. I also report about my single interview concerning a distressing near-death experience. After discussing disclosure patterns, I examine those major factors which

have the potential to precipitate or obstruct disclosure options. Investigation of disclosure satisfaction and dissatisfaction follows which includes some detailed descriptions regarding the effect of listener response. Finally, a discussion of secrecy and a companion topic, disclosure depth, completes the material in this chapter.

Disclosure Motives

Disclosure motives, and the strength these motives provide to overcome communicative obstacles, are best comprehended when one recalls the near-death experience's characteristics and primary effects. Near-death experiences are known to eliminate or strongly reduce one's fear of death. The experience's reality is seldom doubted by the individual. Its legacy often includes a dramatic recasting of one's perspective about reality, purpose, the human body, and connections with others. Finally, the near-death experience often precipitates some questions even as it resolves others.

When near-death experiencers described their past conversations about the happening, five decisional sequences emerged as strong patterns. The underlying motives that direct these sequences are the subject of this section. A motive governs the process of listener selection and shapes the expectations which produce feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction afterwards. Motives may function independently in fueling disclosure

interactions with others. At times, however, a single disclosure occasion has the potential to fulfill several of these intentions.

Interacting with the chronicle of human experience. Perhaps the most burdensome short-lived legacy of having a near-death experience is the sense of singularity. This singularity necessarily carries a sense of uniqueness, which may be interpreted as painful alienation and/or spiritual distinction. If one has no knowledge of near-death experiences before one's own happening, one is left pondering: why haven't I heard of this before? am I the only one? why hasn't anyone spoken of this to me? In some way the chronicle of human experience, both written and oral, has failed them. When this experience comes without any preparation, it may precipitate a kind of psychic shock. The thought that one might be alone among humans in having this kind of experience is a ponderous notion. A search of 'the records' is in order.

This search may take the form of locating reading material or asking those in a position of authority. Verifying one's autoscopic memories through questioning witnesses at the scene and/or requesting one's medical records may be another expression of this impulse. For those individuals whose experiences happened during childhood, parents are often the initial authority turned to for information. (Eight persons in this group had

their first near-death experience before the age of 18.) Children may assume that the experience is natural and speak openly about it at first. A negative response from parents may lead to the subject being treated as taboo.

Adults are usually more aware of the volatile response the narrative may provoke, having detected their culture's suspicion of paranormal subjects in general. Yet the need for interacting with that official record of experience is felt by adults as well. Suspecting that someone whose profession involves a deep familiarity with these kinds of happenings may be in a position to shed light on the matter, some individuals look for opportunities to question authorities. Doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, nuns, ministers, and psychologists are the professionals most frequently mentioned as potential resources. As is the case with the child whose parent (authority) reacts unsupportively, if the professional responds negatively the adult near-death experiencer is left with a resounding singularity she or he is at a loss to explain. This experience is so powerful, however, that it does not seem to be jetisoned completely from one's memory. Individuals may enter a long period of suppressing any mention of their vivid, extramundane happening after a negative response from a perceived authority.

To meet needs for caution, adult queries to authorities may begin as oblique references, such as the revelation of information which an unconscious person would not be expected to know about. One woman, whose experience included an autoscopic view of surgery, asked her doctor about some specific emergency procedures which she had observed. The doctor denied that any of those procedures had occurred. This woman waited for seven years before retrieving her own medical records and confirming what she had observed. "I get mad that I went for seven years, that, not knowing for sure," she reported.

Another woman, whose death certificate had been signed, had extensive autoscopic observations before she suddenly regained consciousness. She presented her observations to the doctor. "He didn't want to hear it. . . . But he really, but I went back to him, he really put me down. 'You really shouldn't be talking about that.'" As she was able to gain confirmation from many other persons, this woman clarified for herself the validity of her observations. She took care not to speak of it to other medical personnel throughout her subsequent nursing training, although she spoke of it briefly during patient care with dying patients.

A middle-aged man, recovering from heart attack, felt strong concern about what happened during his near-death

experience. He had never heard of this before, yet he witnessed procedures from a point above his body and also had extensive transcendent elements. He insisted that his wife and son be present when he spoke to his doctor about it. The doctor replied "'it's called near-death syndrome.' And I received that as professional, you know, from him. And I never questioned it after that."

A woman whose experience brought great spiritual meaning decided to confide in a priest.

> He said to forget it. It was of no importance. And to put it behind you, and to go on living with your life. And it's not possible, and it's not possible. It's not something that you can forget. And, since he said that, I have mentioned it much much less. Much much less. And I don't know why. . . . I understand now, after reading about the Fatima story and that priest.

At first this woman was "shocked" that her experience would be so easily dismissed by her priest. But after reading of other vision stories in Catholic history she realized that seldom does a priest believe the individual. She surmised that priests who don't have first hand experiences aren't likely to believe in the experiences of others.

Accessing the records of human experience with regard to this happening might take the form of either oral communication or locating written material. In addition to needs to <u>retrieve</u> information from authoritative sources, I noted the impulse to <u>register</u> one's experience into some form of public or authoritative record. As a

natural expression of safeguarding valuables, preservation emerges when the experience is viewed as potentially valuable to others as well.

Preserving an account of one's own experience may begin as an entry in a private journal and may also include writing short stories, poems, or essays. For experiencers who believe that others will benefit from this documentation, this motive prompted more public or official disclosures. For example, for some experiencers this was the impulse which directed their decision to contact me as a researcher in near-death experiences. This motive seemed to emerge from a sense of duty to posterity, a hope to contribute to the topic's exploration, or--in the cases of individuals who had been outspoken skeptics of paranormal or religious topics--an obligation to set the record straight. Those who had been aided by the recorded accounts of others' near-death experiences sometimes wanted to contribute officially as a concrete expression of their own gratitude to unknown others who had recorded it before. Throughout the many reasons offered for adding to the chronicle of human experience was the hope that through their contribution that chronicle might more faithfully reflect the tenor and plenitude of these happenings.

One man who said he speaks of this "often" readily admitted that before his own experience he used to laugh at these kinds of accounts.

> I've heard about out of body experience, where they looking down, and can see themselves laying down there, and I used to laugh at that, thinking oh-kooks you know. But I don't think that now. . . . People know me, I don't bull. You know, I'm not one to make up stories.

Similarly another man who also speaks of his experience often offered this account:

> I'm known as a hard ass, ok? And everybody knows me. . . . I don't think anybody would think I was lying about it. . . . I don't know whether I'd believe or not [before me experience] but I know NOW that, I'd believe them now.

In both of these instances, a demeanor of general, outspoken skepticism before their near-death experience provided both the credibility to speak of this often and seemed to fuel the motive to 'set the record straight'.

One woman said she would tell her children when she thought they were ready because if they ever had this kind of experience it might help prepare them. A man offered this explanation: "In general, I think the more people speak of these experiences, the better life is served in general. That's a huge statement, but I really think that's, that's true." Another man described this motive with the following words:

> Your request was interesting because we've learned so much, if people don't record the existence of the matter, then we will be so much the poorer. The experience, my experiences, good, bad, or indifferent, have to be recorded, have to be put

> forth in some logical, it's crass to say in some scientific way, in some logical system, so that it can be catalogued. This is important. If this little piece of information helps somebody, wonderful, that's fine. Because I've found it interesting over the years to be able to read of other's experiences.

When an experiencer is moved to access the official record through reading or disclosing their experience to a perceived authority, the interaction tends to be short and direct. This is the motive that would lead a person, for example, to locate one article about near-death experiences, feel great relief, and not search for other material. For instance, one woman summarized her reaction succinctly when she came across the first article about near-death experiences about five years after her own:

> I went and got the book and uh, but surprisingly I don't like reading all these case histories of all this stuff, because it, it's not my- it's not what happened to me, it's good to know, it reinforces that this was real, that other people have experiences like this, but to read all these, you know, chapter after chapter of people who've had all these experiences, um, it kinda reduces it to something less than it was for me.

While disclosing to an authority, a person trying to access the record might present a short version of their experience. This need to resolve apparent singularity, then, may be so urgent that it eclipses other motives for disclosure which surface later.

Similarly, when one seeks to disclose his or her extramundane happening so that it may be entered into the official chronicle of human experience there tends to be a

monologic quality to the interaction. The importance of the experience may be asserted, of course. But its greater meaning may not be dwelled upon since that would move into an area of personal interpretation. 'For the record' description is empirical description: what happened, what I saw, etc. Interpretation is often prefaced with remarks like "for me" or "I don't know, but I think" or "between you and me here's what I believe."

Integrity. This motive comes closest to Jourard's (1971) speculation of a human need for transparency. Because near-death experiences powerfully shape some of an individual's most fundamental beliefs (about bodily survival and life's purposefulness, for example) many respondents equated knowing about this experience with knowing them well. "I don't think they could understand me until that" is the way one man chose to phrase this motive. Pushing this idea a step further, another experiencer discussed how her experience left her with an enhanced understanding of personal integrity. In describing why she speaks openly about her near-death experience, she responded:

> I feel like my personal integrity is important to me, my only reflection of me is me, it's the only thing I have. That's strange because I don't think I ever realized in my lifetime how lonely we're gonna be. . . . You're everything you have, and that gets real scary because you think, me, I'm the only person that I have. . . . It's like my personal integrity, as far as I'm concerned, means more to me than whatever my kids do.

Personal integrity in this matter seems to require a kind of match between inner perspective and outer honesty.

Nearly every experiencer disclosed this happening with their spouse, for example, if they were married at the time. The experience is intimate, cherished, and important. The desire to share it with another who is cherished, intimate, and important seems completely natural, experiencers report. How much detail experiencers disclosed depends on several factors such as initial reaction from the spouse and perceived interest. If the spouse were intensely upset by even the crisis topic, then one's mention of a near-death experience might be cursory. Similarly, if alarm or skepticism met their initial disclosures a short version might suffice. Depth of disclosure is apportioned to depth of interest and acceptance in the listener.

Also, while this experience is profoundly personal, its effects are likely to have substantial influence on intimate relationships. For these and similar reasons, a sense of integrity may impel a kind of confluence that includes revealing this experience in some way to explain or clarify changes in the experiencer. Disclosure decisions of this type may be prompted by direct questions or expressions of frustration by others in a close relationship. A few examples illustrate how this motive spurs disclosures.

An individual may be immersed in strong emotion after the experience, emotion that seems inexplicable to others. If an individual, for example, believes she or he were "sent back" or abruptly torn from that place of peace by resuscitation efforts, a time of great anger might ensue. Explaining that anger might prompt an experiencer to describe the extramundane peacefulness, as it did with a young woman who was so angry when she was rescued from drowning that her friends were intensely puzzled and possibly concerned about her mental clarity. This disclosure would be directed toward those involved others who are affected/puzzled by one's anger.

On the other hand, great euphoria may create a sense of distance between the individual and the details of daily life. One man, for instance, descibed his "moutaintop year" after his near-death experience. His spouse groped to understand this, and his detachment from the rudimentary details of life caused problems between them. Together they talked about the near-death experience at length. Another man received a specific message during his near-death experience but was perplexed about how to fulfill that mission and how his career fit into the picture also. He has discussed his experience and attendant reprioritization with his wife and is acutely aware that his career choices affect her

dramatically. This is how he described the message and his dilemma:

> 'Go back and help others!' He never told me how. . . . It has caused me to, a, have a problem - I guess, getting cranked back up. I a, right now, I a, I know that there's there's several places here in town that I could go and help.

Some persons ascribe changes in careers and personal temperament to these experiences. One person wrote about her near-death experience in her application to graduate school because her experience was the major impetus for the career shift. Recognizing that close others may be impacted by shifts in attitude and behavior, a sense of fairness may impel experiencers to reveal the source of these changes. The responsibility to answer inquiries honestly also makes <u>responding</u> a somewhat different decision from <u>initiating</u> since the integrity issue is directly relevant at that point.

Disclosures motivated by integrity in this way are expressions rather than explorations. These disclosure decisions are usually made deliberately when initiated by the experiencer, with care about timing, setting, and relevancy. They also tend to begin as monologic narratives, what one experiencer called "one-sided conversations." They function as explanations or justifications for changes which are attributed directly to an experience which no other can know about without disclosure. For disclosures initiated by this kind of

motive, an appreciation for the significance of this event is desired. The disclosure itself may not attenuate dramatic aftereffects. Rather, such disclosures are outgrowths of personal honesty and may function as a plea for accord.

In a few cases, personal integrity seems to play a role in requiring response to inquiries made by others. Several individuals mentioned their near-death experience in response to questions about the source of specific attitudes, behaviors, or personal traits. A nurse, for instance, is sometimes asked how she became so attuned to people's inner feelings. She reports that she might talk about her near-death experience as an explanation for her enhanced sensitivity. A number of experiencers commented that answering questions related to near-death experiences could precipitate their disclosure. It seems that answering a question honestly is perceived as a manifestation of integrity. Even in circumstances where an individual might not initiate any mention of their experience, the obligation to respond honestly to a serious question may bring the topic into a conversation.

Exploration. As Greyson (1983a), Moody (1977), and Ring (1985) have documented, some individuals emerge from their extramundane happening with a profound sense of sudden understanding. Greyson (1983a) found that 30% of the group he researched reported this element from their

near-death experience. Two psychoanalysts, Raft and Andresen (1986) have conducted an intensive study of near-death experiencers who report elements of sudden understanding with attendant pursuit of self-knowledge. They found, for instance, that persons in this group "become very curious about themselves, and they create special states of mind in which they find access to mutative experiences of self-knowing. They also tolerate the sense of uncertainty that openness to new knowing requires" (p. 319). Raft and Andresen contrast this group with those who regard their near-death experience as a "religious conversion," an experience that is professed as ending uncertainty.

Within the group of experiencers who met with me for this study, I encountered those whose extramundane event was viewed as a religious conversion. These individuals were interested in informing me, and I found myself listening at some length to their claims of certain knowledge and belief. Also within my research group, however, were individuals who wanted to pursue knowledge and self-understanding in active and continued exploration. This exploration seldom involved doubts about the reality of their near-death experience per se. Rather its meaning and implications were the subject of serious reflection and investigation. The act of putting this experience into writing was mentioned, in addition to

extensive conversations, as an important enterprise. While exploration may be confined to private reflection and reading, it often involves interactions with others which includes disclosure about one's experience.

For persons with this latter attitude, our research interview still included their crisis narrative. However, uncertainties were owned and voiced about issues like life-purpose, mind-body relationships, and the ultimate connection between their experience and the one that follows their final meeting with death. They wanted to ask questions of their own as well as provide responses to my queries. This interview with a researcher was considered a potential resource for continued learning. Some individuals conducted or were in the process of conducting significant exploration into these areas. These investigations typically included locating written materials, finding others with similar interests, entering therapy, or setting aside regular time for reflective silence.

For one experiencer, a pilot/engineer, subsequent reading on the subject had focused on a search for scientific information. He offered this summary:

> I've done more reading about traveling at high speeds, and more reading about what happens when nerves deteriorate, looking for a physical explanation of what happened. The thing that keeps bugging me, is the sensation of traveling at high speed and the distinct feeling of being somewhere. I think there can be no question, I FELT that I had gone somewhere.

Another experiencer began researching the experience intensely when she saw a reference to near-death experiences on the Johnny Carson show many years after her own experience. As a professional researcher herself, she knew how to access a wide range of materials. After her own exhaustive research she concluded that "nobody knows." She described at length how she has spent many years pursuing self-knowledge including relentless frankness about her own ego traps. About a more recent television program featuring a panel of near-death experiencers, she commented:

> They started trying to outdo each other, their egos got involved, and I thought 'you'd think they were playing baseball. They trying to hit a home run! This is ridiculous. They don't know.' . . . They did it obviously, because I can listen, and even though they would chose different adjectives, it was that awe. And so if you watch a person who's who's done that, and if you listen to them, at some point they become almost tongue-tied or speechles because THERE ARE NO WORDS.

During my interview with this experiencer, she was as interested in speaking about her journey of self-understanding as she was about her near-death experience. Painstaking honesty had brought hard-won insight. During our interview she was not looking for neatly-packaged answers, but she was delighted to explore issues of self-knowledge with anyone who could examine these issues with equal candor.

Another experiencer realized she was "not in a positive support system" within which she could ponder and

explore the implications of her experience. She had quit organized religion many years earlier saying "I was searching for answers that they couldn't give me." She searched out a small group of individuals she had once belonged to who were dedicated to exploring means to inner peace. Because they treated personal experience seriously, she felt safe enough to make her first disclosure about her near-death experience to this small group of persons.

The near-death experience was referred to as a "double-edged sword" by one individual in a sentiment echoed by other respondents.

> And I also felt like too that I had been given a gift that was a real double-edged sword. That it a, it opened up a whole new realm of possibilities, but it gave me no answers, and it didn't tell me where to find them.

It seems that for some experiencers a move to exploration comes directly from the content and immediate effects of this happening. Exploration does not necessarily precipitate interpersonal disclosure, although exploration seemed to play an significant role in motivating some experiencers to initiate contact with me.

Although some individuals seem to emerge from their near-death experience and quickly turn to exploration, I found that for others exploration comes as a later stage. For these persons, the near-death experience's meaning and implication may have been plumbed as far as seemed

necessary in the past, perhaps even receding into the background. A shocking or disturbing set of events catapults this happening and its related issues into the foreground again. Examples of the kinds of situations that may precipitate a re-examination of one's near-death experience are death of a loved one, completion of one's agreed life-purpose, uncertainty about one's purpose in this world, and conflict within one's religious affiliation. At these times, initial understandings are shaken and dissected. Old answers no longer suffice. It is likely that one's circle of close others, whether family, friends, or church group, held beliefs consonant with one's initial understandings. While these kinds of personal upheavals can be quite disruptive, what is important for this study is the extent to which these individuals spoke of returning to their near-death experience as a touchstone they trusted.

Among the people who agreed to meet with me, for instance, was a young poet. Not only did he describe himself as a poet, but his poetry figured prominently in his decision to return to his body. Here's how he described the part of his experience that involved his poems:

> Very soon it started happening that I could still remember my poems, which were very important to me at the time because I was writing a lot. And I was worried that I might not be able to remember all of them, but they were all there. . . . I had the feeling that one of the reasons I couldn't die was I

> had to finish writing them. . . . [my poems] were there and they had to come through me. . . . It seemed like there was this little golden mist stuff, and that was my poems that had to come through me.

At the time of the interview, four years had passed since his experience. He had been writing since then, including poems about the experience itself. But for six months he had terrible writer's block. "For the last six months I haven't been writing and I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to do. . . . I don't feel like I'm fulfilling myself, fulfilling what I am." Clearly this young man was feeling anxiety about this dilemma. This anxiety seemed more acute however specifically because within his near-death experience his fulfillment as poet seemed central to his destiny. Indeed, completing his poetic destiny was the primary reason he chose not to stay in that place "of fulfillment and love."

When persons report that they were given the free choice to "stay or return", a common reason for returning is to fulfill responsiblities as parents to young children. While raising their family, then, one's near-death experience may provide a loving reminder of one's devotion to this life purpose. But when the children are adults, especially if one has placed great emphasis on this facet of one's daily life, 'empty nest' feelings may be intensified. One recalls their choice to leave that place of unparalleled peace with some latent grief. It is as if one's beloved home has been left behind in order to

complete a mission of importance. Now that the mission is fulfilled, one feels marooned. As the dimensions of loss become clearer, a period of grieving sets in. One must recast a sense of purpose from the ashes of sadness, as it were. Within this process a return to that experience which originally highlighted life's purposefulness often occurs.

A man in his sixties had suffered a heart attack twelve years earlier. He had been given the choice to stay or return within his near-death experience. Though he wanted to remain in that experience, he chose to return because his children were still young. He had spoken to only one other person about his experience and done very little reading about the subject in the twelve years that elapsed. At the time of our interview, the children were grown and his wife retired. "I guess that's what causes this thing in the back of my mind, that really that would not have been a bad way to go. . . . I would have been perfectly content to go then." Two years later, I recognized this man among the persons who were regularly attending a university class on paranormal experiences. Because his religious background had been so conservative and he had done so little to investigate the experience at the time of our interview, I was surprised to see him there. He approached me after I made a presentation and asked if I remembered him. He told me that his wife had

been ill and needed his care, but that she had died about six months earlier. Both the completion of his purpose in life (as he saw it at the time) and the death of a loved one seemed to cause a new period of thoughtfulness and exploration about near-death experiences and related issues.

I found that in addition to completion or thwarting of one's purpose, the death of a loved one seems to shift one's near-death experience suddenly into the foreground. One widow reported that the death of her spouse made this topic much more important to her, although the experience had occurred fifteen years earlier. She found herself thinking about it deeply and wanting to talk about it. Several respondents found that issues around their own near-death experience became significantly more relevant after their child had died suddenly. This recent death was specifically mentioned as triggering a desire to talk and think about near-death experiences more. One woman's experience occurred when she was a young child. More recently, she had several crises during a short period of time, including the lingering illness and death of a beloved godmother. As her grief unfolded, she realized that unresolved issues lingered all those years and she consulted a counselor to work these out. It was here in counseling that she began to probe the deep meaning of her near-death experience. Shortly before our interview her

son had been killed in an accident. Still exploring connections between her experience and her son's spiritual fate, she contacted me for an interview. Another woman had spoken to no one after her autoscopic near-death experience. But when her son died suddenly, she found herself going over all the details of her own experience and wondering what awaited her own son after his death. She was in much distress and hoped that discussing these matters with me might bring some resolution.

Sometimes the event that begins a period of exploration later is not a sudden crisis but a lingering unresolved conflict about an issue regarding life-purpose, spirituality, or death. For instance, if the beliefs of one's lifelong religious institution are no longer tenable or credible, a religious crisis can bring one's near-death experience to center stage. This seemed to be the case with one respondent who began re-examining the tenets of the Catholic Church after a lifelong association. This individual has pondered deeply which 'God' to believe in. The 'God' described in her church, the one who watches and punishes, seemed increasingly less credible while the loving presence within the near-death experience seemed more and more worthy of the name 'God.' She gave herself permission to take a "sabbatical" from the Catholic Church, a decision that gave her freedom to explore ideas beyond the sanction of her church. Less inclined to adopt

an all-or-nothing dogmatism, she calls herself a "cafeteria Catholic." Her initial disclosure about near-death experiences had occurred after this period of exploration had begun. This individual's decision to contact me was based on the hope that some increased understanding of near-death experiences would result from the interview.

Of all the struggles that individuals mentioned after their near-death experience, the most prominent was the struggle to understand and fulfill their purpose in life. Because near-death experiences are known to instill a confidence that life does indeed have a purpose, experiencers may find that identifying that purpose is an urgent need. For instance, this need might be especially acute for those individuals who were 'sent back' with a message something like "it's not your time yet, you have work to do." Often expressed was the hunch that their purpose must be related in some way to the fact that this unique and awesome experience had been given to them. These individuals would recall the details of their experience looking for some insight into that purpose. That reverie did not seem to provide much guidance, however, among the persons I interviewed. In fact, remembering the experience seemed to intensify the desire to resolve this matter since that memory included a state of bliss beyond this world. Resolving the issue of life's

purpose seemed to be required before one was allowed to move out of this life. Thus this quandary functioned as a kind of obstacle between them and entrance into that blissful afterlife.

The period of exploration kindled by this quandary was prolonged, at least in the persons who talked about this. This exploration often seemed to involve reading and talking to others who could shed any light on this process, a process which is already one of life's most mysterious tasks. At times, their pain was evident. Some had focused on this issue for most of their lives. One woman had collected a small library through thirty-six years of reading after her experience. "I think my feeling was I had to understand what death meant, so that I would understand what life meant. That was my whole question, right there." Within her experience she had not been given a free choice about staying, having been sent back. At first she was so busy caring for her children that this activity seemed to be the 'purpose' of her return. Now in her seventies she admits that she still doesn't know what her purpose in life truly was. She enjoys talking about it with anyone who will seriously ponder these issues, and she was eager to talk with a researcher whose interest was strong.

Another experiencer had experienced a great business failure just before his heart attack. Within his near-

death experience he was told to "'go back and help others!' He never told me how!" He asserts that "it's the little things that you do" that are important. He's not earning much money now, and doesn't want money to replace his devotion to God. But how is he to implement his newfound spiritual understanding? "The only thing that's gnawing at me is, a, what are you going to do? You know. C'mon! Get it in gear." After the tape recorder was turned off, we talked at great length about the mysterious process of finding one's purpose in life.

Another experiencer described herself as a multitalented person who still didn't feel she was clear about her purpose in life. She had been 'sent back' after two separate near-death experiences, one in her early childhood and one in her twenties. Now in her forties, she recalled recently being asked about her near-death experience during a dinner with friends. "How has it chnaged your life?" she was asked. This is the way she describes her reply:

> My answer to him was . . . it just sort of came out,I just said that,a, it makes me wonder if I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing and if I've already done what I'm supposed to do. And if I'm doing it, the right thing.

This reply, the initial response to a question about residual effect, captures a sentiment that surfaced frequently during interviews with near-death experiencers. While this human concern does not in itself distinguish

near-death experiencers from others, for many experiencers it proved to be an absorbing issue that prompted them to initiate exploratory interactions. Futhermore, and more pertinent to this study, an account of one's near-death experience surfaces when the source of the concern is traced fully.

Exploratory interaction is more dialogic than monologic in character. For near-death experiencers who initiate disclosure for this motive, both speaking and listening play a role in the disclosure conversation. Perhaps the experience account is itself organized as a narrative, but there's a willingness to examine different aspects of the experience through dialogic give and take. It's as if the experience has not yielded all its riches, so the experiencer would welcome the assistance of an interested and knowledgable other. And those two characteristics--genuine interest and cognizance--are the traits desired in selecting a listener.

Helping others. Among all the motives overtly acknowledged during these interviews, the willingess to disclose in order to help others was the most robust. Experiencers appreciate the magnitude of one legacy in particular: fear of death is eliminated or greatly reduced. When experiencers are confronted face-to-face with a frightened, terminally ill person or with any person who brings anxious concern to the prospect of

death, they would like to extend the benefits of their near-death experience to the frightened other. And because the thought of one's own death no longer brings anxiety, these individuals do not seem to avoid those face-to-face circumstances as they might have otherwise.

In some circumstances, the disclosure itself may not be the best vehicle for delivering this comfort. But if disclosure is judged to be a potential for comfort, the motive to share may be experienced as strongly as a sacred obligation.

One man talked of visiting a dying person in the hospital. He discussed some spiritual matters with the person, listening to his concerns. "I think I gave him a little bit of comfort, and allayed some of his fears, but I was drawing on the knowledge of my experience, but not divulging my experience." Another experiencer described this impulse with these words: "Oftentimes when people are sick and are going to die and I've known them, and I know that they're particularly vulnerable, I go and sit with them. . . . [Dying] isn't frightening."

Besides reaching out to dying persons one is familiar with, some experiencers volunteer in this area or choose occupations involving sickness or grief counseling. One nurse, for instance, began volunteering for Hospice work after her near-death experience even though she had repeatedly turned down such requests before that time.

Other experiencers are approached by persons troubled about dying, especially if the experiencer has been particularly open in disclosing their experience. At times an experiencer's own inner peace through tremendous medical crises has prompted a physician to ask the experiencer to visit with another ill patient. I will provide but a few examples of disclosures prompted by this motive.

One man, a college professor, had read about near-death experiences before his crisis event and began talking about his own experience immediately after resuscitation. As word spread among his colleagues, he found himself approached on a fairly regular basis by persons struggling with death and fear. He recalls the day when he was approached by a news reporter about an interview. He thought about that decision, because he realized the full implications of going public with this disclosure. "If I say yes to this, I don't know where it's going to end. . . . I thought about it." He decided to agree to the interview, embracing the attitude that he doesn't "have ownership over this." Now, many years later and still a busy professional, he continues to respond to requests, agreeing to see people if it might bring comfort. Most recently a psychologist asked him to talk with a woman who had lost her teen-aged daughter in an accident. He may never know for sure what comfort, if

any, his talking about his experience brings. "Even if she's totally skeptical," he said, "if for one minute on the way home it gives her a respite from the God-awful pain she's in, then it's ok."

A teacher shares her experience once a year in religion class when the topic of death is discussed. She admits that "ninety percent of it's gonna be over their head or go in one ear and out the other." She also admits to being teased about it, by youngsters and adults, and is sometimes disturbed at the way it can spark unfounded rumors. "It's hard when something is so dear to you and so important to you, and other people make light of it" she adds. Why does she risk such an unsatisfying disclosure situation?

> But if it affects one person, . . . maybe when this kid's thirty, and is dealing with the death of a loved one, or is dealing with a similar experience that I've had, they'll remember that and it will help them over it.

With one middle-aged man, his near-death experience was a transcendent one that resolved some very personal spiritual dilemmas. Calling his experience "very private" he adds that there's no need to cast pearls before swine. He had only spoken to two others about his experience when he was asked one day to meet with a dying woman whom he knew through church. This was a delightful person whom he would have predicted was accepting of death, but it turned out she was struggling with the prospect of her imminent

death. So he agreed to meet with her. "And of all the things that came to me to say ...I said, 'you know, I really envy you the trip.'" When I asked about her response he replied "her eyes responded in such a way that I think she understood."

Some experiencers are surprised at the power their disclosure can have to bring comfort to others. Upon realizing that potential to give comfort, an initial disclosure decision for this motive may inaugurate greater willingness when subsequent disclosure opportunities present themselves.

Experiencers report that when talking about this personal event to help others, they often tailor their speaking to the needs and readiness of the listener. In these kinds of exchange, a near-death experiencer may spend time listening closely in order to decide, first of all, <u>if</u> a disclosure would be genuinely helpful and second, what kind of narrative interaction would meet the listener's needs best. For example, experiencers report that if the ill person has not acknowledged their impending death, discussing a near-death experience may be more frightening than helpful. Intuitive and spiritual awareness are sometimes mentioned as resources during this decision process which aims at assessing the listener's openness to the topic.

Disclosures motivated to comfort or help others may be selective in content, limiting the narrative to those elements which are pertinent to the needs at hand. It may not be so important to recount an entire narrative, for instance. Rather, the experiencer may highlight the hopeful legacy of their own encounter with death through a combination of experience segments with meta-experience comments.

With a terminally ill person, an opening comment about having been "as sick as you are" or "facing death before" serves the function of 'knocking at the door.' The experiencer, seeking to comfort only if the listener is ready for such an interaction, will usually not proceed if initial comments are not followed by signs of willingness. One nurse who cares for seriously ill patients begins by noting signs of unfinished business in the conversations or behavior of the patients. And a counselor who specializes in helping dying and grieving persons reported that interactions about death can reach a level of topic intimacy quite quickly.

A professor who has been quite open in discussing his experience is approached often by individuals with questions. He began streamlining his remarks to fit the listener's needs to the point that recently when a student came to see him about this experience, the man said "just ask me the questions you have and I'll be glad to answer

them." To the man's surprise the student did not respond with a question. Rather the following dialogue occurred:

> 'No, no, I want to hear you tell it as you experienced it.' I said [thought], 'well, this is a person with some presence.' And I said, 'well, this might take thirty minutes,' and he said, 'well, that's why I came during this time when there's an hour and a half. I really want to hear you tell it all.'

This man was impressed that the student could distinguish between talking about a momentous event and recapturing its full meaning through narrative. Sensing that this willingness to hear the entire story implied a respectful attitude toward life, the man took the time to tell the whole story.

Telling the whole experience, just as it happened, does take time. As I described in the preceding chapter, a full narrative of this kind recreates the context in which the experience's meaning can be assimilated as well as the happenings. Judging from my interviews, opportunities in which an experiencer can truly recount the near-death experience in its fullness are not common. But when those opportunities present themselves, also presented are invitations to allow another kind of motive to emerge.

Anamnesis. In writing about sacred experience in his book Landscapes of the Sacred, Lane (1988) dramatically argues that "meaningful experience is always 'placed' experience" (p.5). Though this book does not specifically

address near-death experiences, Lane uses just these experiences as an example of "limit-experiences" in the following excerpt in his prologue (p. 5):

> This indefatigable effort to anchor meaning in place is particularly evident in personal narratives of religious experience. Knowing God, like falling in love or living through a near-death experience, is inescapably contextual. All limit-experiences cause us to gather up every thread of meaning from the context in which they occur. In our memories, therefore, we return first of all to the place 'where it happened'.

This "inescapably contextual" quality of near-death experiences moves the experiencer to return to that "place" to gather up those threads of meaning. Talking about one's near-death experience as an event-object is distinct from returning once again to that place.

In narrative terms, 'place' is interpreted both literally, in the sequence of events, and significantly, in its meaningspaces. Not only was one's near-death experience embedded in a specific physical crisis, it also was embedded in an ongoing personal odyssey. What happened is important; what it <u>means</u>, however, is of paramount importance. Reconnecting with that meaning is a contextual act. Narrative is the discourse form which most fully offers such reconnection.

In her book called <u>Secrets</u>, Bok (1983) recognized that humans experience the power of that which is hidden and set apart. The attraction of secrecy is "rooted in encounters with the powerful, the sacred, and the

forbidden . . . . Efforts to guard secrets, probe them, or share them often aim for this deeper and more pervasive experience" (p. 5). Narrative disclosures about near-death experience often aim, I believe, for this deeper and more pervasive experience of that power within the narrative interaction. Narrative offers the possibility of creating, or re-creating, a world one can enter through the imagination. As Hoffman (1992) noted in her work on recounting sacred experience, "while giving and receiving information may occur on one level, the substratum of the interaction is the hope to achieve that kind of direct knowledge that goes by the name 'experience.'" (p. 14). The narrator, through contact with that numinous reality, is once again immersed in relationship with the ineffable. It is this quest for anamnesis--that special kind of remembering which brings the past into the present-- "that may ultimately and unknowingly shape decisions to recount one's near-death experience" (p. 14).

Lane (1988) suggests four axioms that may guide one in understanding the character of sacred space (p. 15).

> 1) Sacred space is not chosen, it chooses. . . . God chooses to reveal himself only where he wills.
> 2) Sacred space is ordinary place, ritually made extraordinary. . . . Ritual acts . . . silence . . . waiting sanctify the site in my memory.
> 3) Sacred place can be tred upon without being entered. Its recognition is existentially, not ontologically discerned. The identification of sacred place is thus intimately related to states of consciousness.
> 4) The impulse of sacred place is both certripetal and centrifugal, local and universal.

Especially for those persons whose near-death experience included contact with an ineffable presence, these descriptions about sacred place adhere. One can find evidence of these characteristics in their narratives and in their disclosure impulses.

In the early days or weeks after one's near-death experience, that sense of intimate contact with the ineffable may persist. One woman described herself as "in an exalted state the whole time I was at the hospital" where she visited other patients often. Expression of that joy is deemed a natural impulse. When the original ecstacy dissipates, experiencers report that they may recall it often. An experiencer who caused a car accident in which her two children were harmed met with me ten months later. She reported that "this vision is my therapy. When I start getting down, and start thinking about what happened to my children . . . I just start thinking about that, and I'm okay." In addition to private recall, narrating the experience in its entirety is one possible avenue for re-establishing that intimate contact with ineffable presence.

When an experiencer revisits that 'place' through narrative recall, he or she surrenders to the vitality of it all again and invites the listener to join him or her in that place. It is this surrender of which John Neihardt speaks when he approached the Indian shaman,

Black Elk, to understand the holy man's spirituality. Neihardt already had all the facts. "What I needed," Neihardt wrote in his book about that meeting, "was something to be received through intimate contact, rather than to be received through telling" (Neihardt, 1972, p. xv). One's silence upon returning to that 'place', whether in memory or narrative, is a ritual act of openness to that ineffable presence. Not only are words insufficient for describing the ineffable, but words may actually impede that contact. A mind full of itself cannot receive other.

Experiencers are fully aware that they can talk about their experience without 'entering' it. Disclosing the experience in a hurried, topical, or occluded manner are all ways of tredding upon that meaningspace without entering it. Many disclosures, then, fail to create the state of consciousness which would make anamnesis possible.

Finally, after a near-death experience many persons are left with that pardoxical impulse Lane describes as "both centripetal and centrifugal." While one yearns for the place where that ineffable was found, one is also broken-hearted to imagine that it can only be found there. This is a great paradox. Thus, experiencers may visit this 'place' in memory often where it is safely preserved, but they also yearn to express its reality in some outer

form so that its life will take root and blossom. This yearning impels myriad forms of expression including poetry, art, and acts of compassion. As another means of healing that broken-heartedness, an experiencer may take the narrative, the 'place' of the happening, into the interactional world in the hope that in some mysterious way the ineffable presence can be known there as well.

My interviews with these experiencers were unhurried, respectful, and private. Expecially after the first three interviews I noted that allowing these persons to talk about this happening as a narrative was a distinct process from asking questions about it. Many asserted afterwards that such complete recall had allowed them to re-experience the peace or the ineffable presence, an opportunity they obviously enjoyed. In these moments I too noted that "luminous" quality Moody (1975) had written about in his early book. Experiencers had commented near the end of the interview that it was unusual to relate it in full detail.

From my perspective as a listener, hearing a full, unhurried account of someone's near-death experience was an intimate experience. The process of gathering up threads of meaning often involved revelation of yearnings or regrets, and admissions of flaws or habits of heart. Quite naturally self-revelation at this depth entails vulnerability. It also may lead to a place beyond words.

Poignant silence became the signpost that most faithfully indicated anamnesis and contact with ineffability. As one experiencer described it, "when someone has had that experience, in a way it speaks for itself, especially if they've had a sense of having a, come face to face with a creator."

I was fortunate to interview a husband and wife whose experiences were separated by twenty-seven years. As a young woman, the wife had a very extensive near-death experience from which she emerged with a strong healing impulse. "I live in awe of her, I really do," the husband told me. Even within his own experience he made the connection between this event and her earlier one. Upon awakening, "she didn't have to say 'yes, no, maybe' She just knew, she understood. And it gave me such satisfaction to finally know, to have some idea of how she has viewed over the years." The wife affirmed that few words were needed during that moment of mutual knowing. Among her husband's first words was the simple phrase "'I finally understand'" spoken with tears.

Patterns of Disclosure

In undertaking this study about disclosure patterns after near-death experiences, I faced this unmistakable and paradoxical challenge: would the individuals who agreed to meet with me represent only the more loquacious of experiencers? I wanted, of course, to understand the

disclosure decisions of both highly disclosive and reticent near-death experiencers. Among the pencil and paper questions asked at the end of the interview were the following three about disclosure (see Appendix D): 1) Give your best estimate of how many persons to whom you have described this experience in some detail, 2) Indicate the degree to which you hold back from talking with others about this experience, and 3) If the circumstances were completely comfortable for you, how would you describe your desire to describe this experience?

The responses to "how many persons told" before the interview ranged from 0 to 1000. A close look at the distribution of these answers reveals that I interviewed persons from a wide cross-section of disclosive frequencies ranging from the highly reticent on one end to those who talk frequently about their experience on the other.

For 3 respondents the research interview was their first disclosure about the near-death experience. Another 3 respondents had told only 1 other person before the interview. Nine individuals had talked in detail with 2 to 5 others before the interview. Out of 50 experiencers, then, 15 (30%) had described their near-death experience on 5 or fewer occasions before the interview.

Fourteen persons (28%) had described their experience for 6 to 15 listeners, and another 14 persons (28%)

reported they had described their experience to 16 to 50 others.

For the 7 respondents (14%) who had described their near-death experience to more than 50 people, the figure's size was largely due to a combination of group presentation and professional encounters. For example, speaking about this experience had blended with professional roles for 5 of those individuals: a social worker who counseled the terminally ill, 2 religious discussion/retreat leaders, a nurse who worked with critically ill patients, and a minister. The 6th individual was a recovering alcoholic for whom the near-death experience had become a major part of his spiritual/recovery narrative in AA. In agreeing to speak about his experience to a religious study group in which he was a member, the 7th individual found that a group of 30 had listened to his experience on a single occasion.

Clearly, then, this group of persons represented a broad range of disclosive habits. By differentiating between group/professional occasions for disclosure and personal disclosure interactions, I detected a smaller range of disclosures in one's personal circles. Indeed, a few individuals circled two answers to the question about frequency of discussion indicating, in each of these cases, that there was greater frequency of disclosure in professional occasions than for personal ones. With that

said, however, for a few near-death experiencers the division between their personal life and their professional life was blurred in this area. Once an individual becomes publicly disclosive about their experience in a professional capacity, they open the door to being approached by countless others--strangers and friends--with inquiries about their near-death experience.

Question 3 was designed to assess the degree to which near-death experiencers hold back from talking about their experience. All 50 persons answered this question. Responses ranged from "never" (5) to "often" 1, with the arithmetic mean for 50 responses being 3.28, a value between "rarely" (4) and "occasionally" (3). Through correlation procedures, I checked the relationship between Question 3 and other recorded demographic, evaluative, and experience-content responses (see Appendices C, D, E and F) and found several significant values.

Responses to Question 3 were negatively correlated with the responses entered earlier on the form to "number of persons told" ($p = .006$). These individuals' assessment of how many persons they have told is consistent with their later responses about relative frequency of discussing this experience. Although this result is not surprising, since both seek to measure disclosure frequency, the level of significance probably

indicates a high level of self-monitoring concerning disclosure decisions.

Question 3 was positively correlated to number of years between NDE and interview ($p = .021$), suggesting that as the number of years since the experience increases the less frequently individuals talk about it. Moreover, Question 3 responses were also significantly correlated (point biserial $r = -.3603$) with the answers to the question of familiarity with near-death experiences before one's own occurrence. If individuals were familiar with near-death experiences before their own, their frequency of discussing it was higher. This finding will be discussed below in the section titled "effect of previous knowledge of NDEs." It should be noted that LAPSE and FAMILIAR were also significantly correlated (point biserial $r = -.6175$). Information about near-death experiences has been more abundant in recent years, so those whose experiences occurred many years ago were less likely to have been familiar with those experiences at the time theirs occurred.

Question 4 was designed to gauge the depth of "desire to describe this experience." Some respondents did not respond to this question; 46 answers were noted. Responses ranged from "very strong" (5) to "no desire" (1). The average was 3.565 (between "strong desire" (4) and "moderate desire" (3). The responses to question 4

were also checked for possible correlation with responses on demographic, evaluative, and experience-content replies.

Responses to question 4 correlated negatively ($p = .051$) with responses to question 2 in which the significance of the experience was rated, indicating that the greater the significance ascribed to the experience the greater the desire to talk about it. Responses to this question were also negatively correlated with age ($p = .037$) suggesting that the older a person is the less desire she or he has to describe this experience. (This sample had a relatively high average age, 49.56 years.) Question 4 was <u>not</u> significantly correlated with number of years since one's near-death experience, however ($p = .528$).

The specific choice of the word "desire" in question 4 elicited a number of comments from the experiencers. The four individuals who did not enter a written response to Question 4 said (orally or in writing) the word "desire" did not accurately describe the element that prompted their disclosures. In addition, another four individuals circled a response but added comments in writing. Instead of "desire", "willingness" was the word most often offered as appropriate. These attenuating comments led me back to the interview material to discern the relationship between desire and willingness.

Questions 3 and 4 were not significantly correlated with one another. The only significant correlations that surfaced between with Question 4 and other responses involved the paranormal components recorded on the NDESCALE. These will be discussed below in section "effect of experience content."

Initial disclosures. Although many years may have lapsed between the initial disclosure event and the interview meeting, the vast majority of experiencers recalled that first decision to speak about their experience with some clarity. The responses provided by their listeners were also recalled. Often within the interview, individuals would attribute the choices they made during subsequent disclosure opportunities to the responses--whether confirming, indifferent, or disconfirming--of those early listeners. Typically, those whom near-death experiencers first choose to speak to about their experiences are persons with whom they share a close relationship (spouses, parents, close friends) or professionals who might be expected to know of these happenings (physicians, clergy, psychiatrists).

In some cases individuals are so convinced that no one will give a confirming response that this firm expectation is itself the reason for withholding any mention of their experience for a very long time. For those persons who talk about it to another, the responses

are not at all uniform. The following two examples of disconfirming responses and their (ascribed) subsequent effects demonstrate the potential influence of these initial interactions.

A middle-aged woman I met with had experienced three near-death experiences at ages 4, 16, and 39 from separate medical crises. During her lengthly autoscopic experience at age 4 she witnessed her beloved grandfather sitting by her sickbed praying and also witnessed an accident in which her mother was burned. Returning to consciousness later she told her grandfather that she wanted to see how her mom's burns were.

> He freaked. He said 'why do you say that?' I said 'my mother burned [her] legs.' He said 'You couldn't know that.' I said 'But I saw her.' I said 'I was right up there by the ceiling and I saw her, and I saw you praying and crying and' I told him some of the things he said.

Her grandfather's reaction was quite strong, a reaction she described as "so upset." She continued, "He picked me up and took me in his arms and held me, and told me, he said 'you know the fever has affected your mind, and you must never talk about this, they'll lock you away."

Some years later after her second NDE at age 16 she tried obscurely to ask the doctor about the topic but he asked her suspiciously "'well why are you asking me that?' Well I wasn't going to tell, cause they would lock me up, I was only 16 and I still believed you could get locked up." After her third near-death experience, 28 years

later, she began to research the topic feverishly in the library. Once a librarian asked her reason for such intense research and the woman reported that she avoided a direct reply. "I still wasn't telling anybody. [Laughter] So it's amazing, I'm a thinking, reasoning adult, but I still was afraid. My grandfather had so frightened me." Until the interview this woman had not spoken to anyone in depth about her experience.

Another woman had a near-death experience during an unpremeditated suicide attempt. Under the care of a psychiatrist at the time, she later relayed many details of the event she had witnessed while out of her body.

> I told her about seeing myself laying there, nurses in there, I described what they looked like and all that, and she said '[name]' she says, 'you're just hallucinating,' she- 'and I don't want to hear that from you again.' She says 'if I hear stuff like that from you again, then I'm going to have to put you in [ward in hospital for mentally ill]...] and lock you up.'

When she couldn't convince the psychiatrist that all these details were authentic reports, she shut up. About six weeks later the psychiatrist referred the woman to a social worker who responded almost identically. "She told me it did not happen." This woman waited about 10 years before she mentioned this experience to another person, and even then she moved very cautiously, passing up several natural openings in conversations with a trusted friend before she spoke of her experience.

While discomfirming initial responses occurred, so did noncommittal or confirming responses. Noncommittal responses seemed to reduce some social anxiety but do not offer support for in-depth exploration or expression. An engineer reported that his wife was so upset by the whole crisis that she did not want to talk about the near-death experience part of it.

> I told her, but she gets pretty upset about it [how close to death he was] and she didn't want to hear the whole story. . . . We don't discuss it anymore except, a, she mentioned, she's listened to a couple of people that have had one of these experiences.

An indifferent response may leave the experiencer guessing about the listener's reaction, as was the case with a woman who nearly died during surgery. She and her husband shared a few moments of intense relief that she had survived the surgery, and she told him about the near-death experience. "I think he probably thought it was a dream, but he never said. He's never really -um- never really talked about it one way or the other."

Confirming responses were greatly appreciated. A woman recovering from major surgery waited until two weeks had passed before mentioning her experience. As it happened her roommate, a close friend, was sitting at home with her one evening and began describing her own near-death experience from several years earlier! In listening to that description this woman realized that her own experience was similar and thought "'well, I'm not so

dippy.'" Her assessment of the experience's importance was also confirmed and she offered her own narrative to the roommate. She described the interaction with these words:

> She was a wonderful person to be the first to tell because she had had an experience herself and she was very receptive and real encouraging. She wanted to know every single thing I remembered about it....[first] She let me tell the story completely without interrupting me, which I liked. . . .And then I also in the process of explaining and telling her the story I realized, 'oh that's taken away my fear of death'...So there was a lot of awarenesses that came from telling her that experience.

After confiding in her roommate, this woman reported that "then I wanted to tell everybody" though she began with those whom she believed would be accepting.

Confirming responses may also play a role in putting to rest validation issues which might have lingered for years. In the following instance, a news article about near-death experiences and a confirming response to disclosure ended a painful period of doubt for a middle-aged man. This particular experiencer, a man in his sixties, spoke about his autoscopic near-death experience eighteen years earlier. He had talked with approximately 10 persons in those 18 years, but to no one in the first 5 years. After resuscitation from the medical emergency in the hospital he decided to repeat to the doctor something the doctor had said while the man was outside of his body. The doctor said "'well, well you weren't unconscious then!' you know. And I wasn't about to tell him, you

know, that I was sitting up on the head of that bed watching." Having recently been promoted at work, he didn't want any doubts cast about his judgment. But this man thought about that occurrence every day for five years afterwards and told no one, "not even my wife, and my wife's a nurse." Then he read an article in the newspaper about near-death experiences. The article relieved him greatly and after asking his wife to read it he told her about his experience. His wife talked about the experience at length with him, especially the religious aspects. "She was a great help in that area...I guess you'd say [I wasn't] ashamed of it anymore." After that day the experience was no longer the subject of daily rumination.

A long-time alcoholic described a similar pressure while waiting for years before he told his psychiatrist. He knew his psychiatrist well, a man who "would listen to me and he never put me down." When I asked him about the risk he took in confiding this he replied "I had to tell someone or get drunk again. Because I couldn't get it off my mind."

In some cases individuals chose to keep the knowledge of their experience quietly to themselves for a span of time before speaking of it to another. This time of secrecy could be spurred by the sturdy expectation that no one would believe them, by the desire to treasure the

experience's vitality, or by a hope to complete some sense-making of it for themselves before speaking of it to another.

Disclosure trends and stages of adjustment. As experiencers sometimes remarked, it is natural that one goes through various stages of adjustment after a major event like a near-death experience. Complicating this subsequent adjustment process is the fact that experiencers are also recovering from another major event as well: their life-threatening physical crisis. That physical crisis has a trailing adjustment process which varies from a shortlived recovery to a protracted convalescence. As might be suspected, these two adjustment processes can affect one another powerfully.

Persons for whom years had passed since their near-death experience remarked during the interview that at times their experience had occupied a great deal of their mental attention while at other times it receded into the background. I talked with persons whose experience was recent as well as with persons whose extramundane happening occurred several decades before. However other factors besides lapse of time seemed to affect one's post-experience focus. Experiencers spoke about the ways in which the specific content of their extramundane event, access to validating information, and availability of

interested listeners had influenced both their disclosure habits and their propensity to dwell on the experience.

Typically the crisis itself is followed by a recovery period of some moment. During those hours of pain and rest, coping skills are usually marshalled toward physical recuperation. The experiencer may actually put the experience into the back of their mind while summoning all their strength for survival or recovery. But often, during long hours of rest and recovery, they ponder what has happened to them and what it means.

One woman who spoke directly about adjustment processes after her near-death experience pointed out that for the first two years it was on her mind a lot. "It was at the front of my waking moments. I relived it a lot of nights, you know, in going to bed, turning the light out." Another experiencer, whose event was four years earlier, spoke specifically about her disclosure habit trends with these words:

> It's not the ecstatic thrilling thing it was at first, where I just couldn't help but tell everybody, and they they caught that reaction. Now it's a simmering kind of thing, where I keep it quietly simmering inside, and I I choose the people that I tell it to, if they and- they and I are on the same...emotional and spiritual level, you know.

Still another experiencer, looking back over the nine years that had passed since her near-death experience, described the experience as "all-consuming" at times. That was especially true immediately after it happened,

and then later when she was going through a difficult divorce. Unless you're prepared to "be on a mountain somewhere, just contemplate, you know", she commented, you have to shut it out of your mind sometimes.

Expanding on the ultimate task of adjustment, another experiencer used these words.

> I think it's not enough to accept that you had a near-death experience, and that you actually found something extraordinary. I think the kicker is to come back here and say 'what did it mean? what am I now going to do meaningful, more positive, that makes a difference.' That's what it meant to me, and I would be very surprised if you do not find that in a lot of other people.

From initial surprise to full integration and acceptance, the process of placing this experience into one's life story involves some fairly common stages. Furthermore, disclosure frequency, depth, and motives shift within these stages. While the following post-experience stages are not exhaustive or exclusive, I found that they represent typical patterns. Futhermore, these stages tend to unfold sequentially and are closely aligned with disclosure practices.

1) Shock/surprise. Immediately following a near-death experience, persons report a period of dislocation. Some persons even claim it takes some days or weeks to feel firmly identified with their body and the earthly realm. The famed psychiatrist Carl Jung wrote about his near-death experience in his autobiography, an experience which terminated when he was told to return to earth. "In

reality," he wrote, "a good three weeks were still to pass before I could truly make up my mind to live again. I could not eat because all food repelled me" (1961/1963, p. 292). If an experiencer is especially angry to have been resuscitated, he or she may retreat into a kind of sulking silence. Others return in a state of ecstasy. As one man reported about his first conscious moments following his heart attack, "Everybody was crying and all these tears. 'I don't know about you but I've just had this great trip.' I wasn't in the mood to cry at all. . . . It answered questions I really had struggled with for years and years."

Experiencers reported three kinds of disclosure decision from those first days/weeks. For some the urge to speak of their joy is overwhelming. Their choice of listener may be fairly unselective. Their disclosure is accompanied by a burst of excitement and they don't seem very attuned to noting listener reaction. Still hooked up to intubation equipment in the trauma room, one man--who knew of these experiences before his own--motioned insistently for a pen and paper and wrote "I am not a body."

Others react to this profoundly awesome event by resting in that power, not ready to speak of it. "I wanted to ponder it a while" said one experiencer. Reported another, "this was such a powerful thing that I

couldn't even speak of it; I didn't even tell [husband] about it until months later." For these individuals, non-disclosure poses no frustration. Those early times, spent in the embrace of a great and wondrous secret, function as a period of incubation.

A third reaction to this event is a strong desire to speak of it accompanied by a certainty that no one will understand. Strong paranormal components within the experience coupled with no previous knowledge of these happenings seem to create this disclosure dilemma. This stance impels the experiencer into a state of isolation. A long period of denial, suppression, or excessive rumination may follow. One man who actively refrained from speaking of this for five years afterwards told me he thought of it every day. Another experiencer reported that she was sure others would call her crazy so she spoke to no one until she met with me six years later after the sudden death of her son. "I didn't want to think about it. I didn't want to deal with that. I just chalked it off to hallucinations."

2) Validation. A search for validation typically follows the initial stage of surprise. Previous knowledge about these experiences and/or an especially powerful experience can mitigate this need. Validation efforts may involve reading, watching a television program, or speaking to a respected professional.

When experiencers seek validation through contact with a professional or respected other, an accepting or supportive reaction can ameliorate excessive preoccupation about their singularity and release the individual to begin working on its meaning for their lives. For an individual who has suppressed or denied their experience, confirming information forces them to confront the issue head-on, which may be tumultous at first.

A rejection at this stage, however, can be devastating. Some individuals retreat into communicative isolation. In a few cases within my study, experiencers shut down all disclosure efforts for many years after early rejections like these, keeping their event in a place of solitary psychological space where they thought about it privately. One experiencer described such a reaction with these words: "What it does is it distances you from the person that you told. . . . It sends you back into your- the experience that you know is true, and say well, you know, it's a loss of community with the living." 3) Interpersonal implications. Once an experiencer resolves the question 'should I tell?' affirmatively, the disclosure focus shifts to 'whom should I tell? and 'under what circumstances?' In this stage, experiencers begin to attend to situational variables, listener responses, and distinct motives within themselves.

Once experiencers begin to discuss their extraordinary happening, others can learn of this event secondhand. As the circle of hearsay spreads, they are put in the position of answering direct queries about the experience and begin to notice the difference between initiating the topic and responding to direct questions. The disclosure selection process is slowly refined.

This learning process may be shaped by disclosures that are later regretted, leading experiencers to adopt their own personal set of guidelines. One man was so unhappy with his appearance on a television program that he vowed never to repeat that mistake. Several others shied away from disclosures to groups after unpleasant interactions in those settings. In this stage experiencers find their decisions informed by issues of integrity and desires to help and/or share good news with others.

4) Active exploration. During this stage experiencers actively search for information about these kinds of happenings. This search may largely involve sifting through reading material. Those experiencers who, for various reasons, have chosen a posture of non-disclosure necessarily limit their exploration to written material.

During this phase experiencers actively re-examine their experience and explore its full implications. Career and relationship changes are considered. They may

search for knowledgable professionals or for "like-minded" people to talk openly about these ideas. During such discussions their near-death narrative often surfaces. This search may also prompt shifts in religious affiliation and/or social contacts.

Experiencers report that periods of exploration sometimes ensue after a major life crisis has heightened the importance of death or brought into question earlier conclusions about the experience. Sometimes the exploration period begins when the sense of spiritual consolation and intimacy that lingered after the experience recedes. This stage is seldom brief and experiencers may re-enter a period of extended exploration several times.

5) Integration. Although experiencers are sometimes fascinated by investigations like those that ponder the cause of their extraordinary happening, the question of meaning eclipses all others. Ultimately, the question of cause remains open to new information. The experience of living, however, cannot be kept in abeyance. Experiencers must flesh out the event's meaning in the choices they make day by day.

Even minute decisions and interactions may be informed by this happening. One woman claimed that because she chose to return she felt "obligated to pay my phone bill on time" which she hated to do. She also felt

obligated "to be a good citizen. To vote. To always be kind. To never take away human dignity. To offer a loving hand if I can, without it being ego-centered."

Usually coming after surprise, validation, interpersonal implications, and exploration, the integration stage brings a perspective from which individuals grasp the deeper influence of this event. Experiencers find at this stage that their extraordinary happening is neither at the front of their minds nor forgotten. It has blended imperceptibly into the fabric of who they are.

While discussing their near-death experience may still bring joy, experiencers may choose to describe their disclosure impulse with words other than 'desire' at this stage. Rather, they see themselves as 'willing' to describe their near-death experience, seeing that disclosure as a gesture of honesty and surrender. Speaking twenty years after her experience one woman said, "I don't know that I have changed any one else's life, uh, that's not my concern. My concern is, for whatever reason, for whatever purpose, to be what I feel is a vehicle." While they may not actively search for occasions to speak about this, they honor sincere requests. It's a sense of not having "ownership over this," as one experiencer said. Explained another when asked why he agreed to describe his experience to a group,

'if it helps even one person, who am I to withhold that comfort?'

After grappling with the place this experience holds in their life story, experiencers hope their everyday living remains consonant with that meaningspace. Speaking with me twenty-three years after his extraordinary happening, one man said succinctly: "I have accepted it. And it really happened. And I'm going to live with that."

To a greater or lesser extent, this event has informed career choices, life priorities, beliefs about life after death, and interpersonal values. Aware that new implications may be revealed in time, experiencers who reach this stage have accepted the experience's mystery and its influence in their lives. They have made their peace with it.

Distressing experiences. Researchers know little about distressing near-death experiences though enough reports have surfaced to warrant serious investigation. Greyson and Bush (1992) noted that some 30 written accounts of distressing experiences had been spontaneously mailed during a 10 year interval to investigators associated with the International Association of Near-Death Studies. When distressing accounts were specifically requested through a notice in that group's newsletter, 50 reports were collected.

Because disclosure is the only avenue to information about near-death experiences, researchers must inevitably attentuate any claims with an acknowledgement of their complete dependence on disclosure decisions. When assessing the proportion of near-death experiences that might be of a distressing nature, for instance, researchers cannot know whether these kinds of experience rarely happen or are rarely reported. As Greyson and Bush (1992) aptly noted, "it is difficult to imagine that an experiencer could be indifferent to the cultural assumption that personal merit determines type of experience" (p. 96).

Frequently during my interviews, individuals who described uplifting near-death experiences reported their belief they had "gone to heaven" or somehow received assurance of their ultimate after-death fate. For instance when one experiencer first talked about her uplifting event to a nun in the hospital, the nun remarked that some patients had reported hellish near-death experiences to her. The patient's response was to exclaim "'well I guess I won't go to hell!'" Within my research interviews I inquired about behavior or value changes after these experiences. A few people expressed the logic that this blissful experience had already validated the merit of their behavior thus no change was warranted.

Within my group of 50 experiencers, 1 reported a distressing experience. Certainly one case does not justify broad conclusions. Nevertheless I present this individual's disclosure history for its possible insight into disclosure decisions following a distressing near-death experience.

A man in his seventies contacted me about his distressing near-death experience 40 years earlier. Facing emergency surgery, this man had been advised by his doctor to prepare himself for death. The on-duty priest came to see him but refused to give him the 'sacrament before death' because this man admitted that he had once encouraged a woman to have an abortion. The priest then refused the man's request to join him in prayer. The surgery began shortly afterwards.

This person had never discussed his distressing out-of-body experience until the day he met with me 40 years later. Describing the event as "like I was going to hell" he detailed the sensation of moving at high speed down a narrow tube in terrible darkness with a "deep, melancholy sound" that has haunted him these many years. His reasons for not disclosing this included "I never felt like anybody would understand," "I felt like they'd think I was nuts," and "I was ashamed to say that I had a sensation I was going to Hell." He refrained from talking about this with close family members because he didn't want to

"upset" or "burden" them. He added that despite great closeness in some relationships, this particular concern involved a kind of deep "intimacy" he wasn't prepared to share.

It was obvious this individual was in great spiritual distress. Now an older man, he desperately wants "peace of mind, peace of soul." The recent controversy surrounding abortion, including a religious pamphlet about abortion that described irrevocable spiritual peril, had brought the entire incident to the foreground with fierce intensity. In looking back on his life, he suspected that this haunt had driven him into intense busyness as one means to "get it out of my mind." Though wanting to resolve his spiritual culpability, he resisted the prospect of seeking professional guidance saying such persons were too busy, wouldn't understand, or didn't have proper authority. Though I made several follow-up calls to this individual, I always reached an answering machine and my calls were never returned.

Within this study, I found some evidence that "a cultural assumption that personal merit determines type of experience" (Greyson & Bush, 1992, p. 96) does exist. This assumption and/or the anticipation that listeners will hold that belief has the potential to pose grave disclosure obstacles following a distressing near-death experience. Paradoxically, the recent media attention

about uplifting near-death experiences may also contribute to disclosure difficulties after a distressing experience by creating the impression that uplifting experiences are universally inclusive.

Factors Affecting Disclosure Decisions

Effect of previous knowledge of NDEs. To test the strength of the relationship between frequency of disclosing one's near-death experience and one's prior knowledge of these experiences, a correlation test was computed. Specifically, a point biserial correlation was computed between Question 3 (degree to which you hold back from talking about NDE) and familiarity before one's experience (yes or no). These responses were negatively correlated near the .01 level of significance ($r = .3603$, $df = 48$). Those individuals who were not familiar with near-death experiences before their own occurred were significantly less likely to discuss it.

Near-death experiences hold surprising power even when individuals are familiar with them beforehand. One of the people I interviewed was a minister who had himself lectured about near-death experiences, among other topics, before his heart attack. After his own experience, he told his pastor that the experience had completely changed his image of God. From a disclosure point of view, however, this man was at an advantage. He knew about the existence and prevalence of these kinds of experiences

happening near death. Furthermore, he had others with whom he could freely discuss this event with. After he came home from the hospital, for example, his pastor spend many hours with him and eagerly listened to the experience narrative.

When an individual has no knowledge that these events are possible, their early surprise is more accurately described as a state of alienation and dislocation. The experience itself may be strongly consoling about death, but the resultant feeling of singularity may be acutely troubling on the one hand or erroneously lofty on the other. Furthermore, because they have not heard of this topic, it is logical to assume that no one has ever talked about this topic to them. For all the experiencer knows, she or he is the only person to have undergone such an awesome event. This person is likely to wonder who on earth would ever believe such an account. There is no place in their perspective of reality to place this.

The first popular book about near-death experiences was by Raymond Moody and published in 1976. Before that time, even if the experiencer were an avid reader and active researcher, it would have been exceedingly difficult to obtain substantive information about near-death experiences. A few persons whose experience was many years before 1976 mentioned drawing sustenance from some paranormal literature, such as the psychical

investigations of Bishop Pike, and from Biblical references to visions. This isolation, however, forced them to acclimate with very little support and may have established a pattern of keeping this to oneself.

Later information about this experience typically brings a sense of relief. Individuals reported their first disclosures or an increase in disclosures soon after finding such information, perhaps many years after their own experience. On one occasion an experiencer found that later confirmation disturbing, because he could no longer avoid thinking about his experience's full implications.

In the past 15 years, the media has covered the topic of near-death experiences quite frequently. In addition, there's been a recent spate of movies involving near-death experiences. Even characters in comic strips and television situation comedies are having near-death experiences! While they are at times offended by the trivial attitude exhibited in these various references to an experience they cherish, persons whose experiences occurred long ago generally find this coverage makes the topic more acceptable. As an experiencer from 1959 expressed it, after so many years without any information, any coverage at all is positive and makes it easier to talk about.

Effect of experience content. I investigated experiencers' desire to talk about their extramundane

happening within the interview queries. In addition, I examined their written responses to demographic, evaluative, and experience-content questions and ran correlation tests between those written responses and the answers for Question 4 (desire to describe this experience). Two responses about experience content correlated at significant levels with reported desire to discuss this experience.

The near-death experience scale (NDE SCALE) designed by Greyson (1983a) includes 16 questions that group elements of experience content into the following 4 subtopics: cognitive, affective, paranormal, and transcendent. This scale yields an overall total score, 16 individual scores, and 4 subtopic totals. Of particular significance for this examination of disclosure desire is the paranormal section.

The paranormal section of Greyson's NDE SCALE asks the following four questions: Were your senses more vivid than normal? Did you seem to be aware of things going on elsewhere, as if by ESP? Did scenes from the future come to you? Did you feel separated from your physical body? Responses to Question 4 correlated with experiencers' paranormal subtotal score ($p = .042$) and correlated even more strongly with the response to the first question in this section about senses more vivid than normal ($p = .003$).

I observed within the interviews that some elements within near-death happenings are experienced as tailored to or emerging from one's unique needs and temperaments. For instance, individual experiencers repeatedly emphasized that the self-identity within the experience was a familiar and entire "me." On the other hand, certain elements within near-death experiences seem to speak more profoundly about the nature of reality. Paranormal elements fall into this latter group.

It may be deemed reasonable to attribute affective, cognitive, and transcendent happenings to one's particular character or spiritual journey. Within our life experience come moments that hint of such possibility: sudden insight, review of our past, great joy, decisions about our life's purpose, close relationship to someone who has died. Of course, none of these ordinary moments approximates the order of magnitude when these elements are contained within near-death experiences, but at least the possibility resides within one's imagination. However, paranormal elements within near-death experiences are not likely candidates for such an attribution. The range of our senses and our observational stance as an embodied being...these are common denominators among human beings. Yet within near-death experiences persons report extraordinary happenings like existing outside of their body, incredibly vivid sensual perception, and access to

knowledge beyond their temporal and spatial range. Not only are these paranormal elements beyond the range of satisfactory explanation, they seem to hold dramatic implications for other humans as well. With implications that vast, the desire to talk about this seems to be enhanced.

Persons whose near-death experiences contain paranormal elements feel as if they have a kind of evidence to present on behalf of the experience's reality as well. Sometimes they brought bits of evidence to the interview or elaborated in detail about such corroboration. These individuals can report details of their surgery or specific descriptions of events surrounding the resuscitation scene, for example, facts which can be checked and corroborated. This sense of evidence is not possible with near-death experiences missing those paranormal elements. Armed with that 'evidence', convinced that this news is important for all humans, and eager to explore the implications, experiencers with strong paranormal dimensions have a stronger desire to talk about their happening.

From within the interview material I also noted that experiencers who were convinced that their experience held important implications for the spiritual welfare of others voiced a strong desire to talk about it. Thus the minister who shifted his image of God from a punishing

deity to a loving presence after his near-death experience has a strong desire to speak about this and often does. He wants to correct two errors: a false image of God and the "use of fear to control people." Others echoed sentiments similar to this in explaining their desire to speak about their experience for the spiritual value it might bring to others.

On the other hand, if the experience does not hold many paranormal or spiritual elements, there may be little impetus to disclose it to others. For instance, one individual saw his body in the recovery room and then floated into a tunnel toward an area of light. Recalling a specific phrase about unfinished business, he returned to his body shortly after entering the tunnel. Although this happening confirmed a continued existence after death, it failed to flesh out what that existence would be like and did not involve an encounter with any presence. Although he's glad it happened, this man asserted that 'grateful' is not an apt word to describe his attitude. He feels like he discovered some principle of reality which all will discover when the time comes. "I think it's something- almost like, you step in the ocean you get wet. You know, it's just the way it is."

Listener attitudes and behaviors. Interpersonal disclosures, by their very definition, do not occur in vacuums. A decision to disclose one's near-death

experience is intimately bound up with the decision to disclosure to some particular person/s. Some experiencers' descriptions of their process of assessing listener readiness and responsiveness were amazingly specific. Obviously, this process is often accompanied by close observation and vigilance. A discomfirming response to an early disclosure may heighten this vigilance.

Though one's specific motive may attentuate the list of prerequisites, there was surprising agreement among the experiencers who met with me about the qualities they looked for in a potential listener. In this section, I will summarize those qualities as well as provide a facsimile of methods experiencers use to determine if those qualities are present.

Is this person willing to think seriously about death and beyond? While it is pleasant for an experiencer to encounter unquestioned belief about these experiences' reality, that belief is not a necessary ingredient to the disclosure choice. Of critical importance, however, is the listener's willingness to earnestly ponder the subject of death and beyond. A 'voyeuristic' sense of curiosity functions as a warning sign. If excessive eagerness in a potential listener is interpreted as superficial curiosity, as surreptitious thrill-seeking, or as a cheap effort to evade one's own soul searching, then the door to disclosure will shut quickly. Judging from the

interactions these experiencers' report, that willingness to think deeply about these issues is relatively uncommon in our society. The experiencers who claimed they were willing to speak to almost anyone who was genuinely interested were not few in number. Along these lines, experiencers found that a listener's recent exposure to serious illness or death of a loved one was likely to spark genuine interest in these issues.

Has this person closed his or her mind to new information on this subject? Certainly experiencers are aware that this extramundane happening is not readily accepted by the mainstream. In addition, taking these experiences seriously may eventually lead to stances which conflict with accepted religious dogma. Experiencers know only too well the astounding nature of these happenings. They know that they themselves might have scoffed or remained tentative about these matters had it not been for their personal experience. It is the experience itself, which conveys authoritative certainty, that has enabled them to embrace new perspectives. They have no means available to bestow that certainty upon the listener. As one man said,

> Why I don't speak of it a lot, is that it disturbs people. . . . my perception is that people tend to define themselves within the structure of religion somewhere, so that they have some reason, some semblance of their existence. And they don't need that.

Echoing that sentiment another experiencer explained that if he told others "all I could do would be to break their own faiths" because they'd still have anxiety of things like death and making mistakes and he couldn't take that away. Thus when experiencers say they look for persons with "open minds" they have two characteristics in mind. First, they look for someone with the willingness to hear new ideas on this topic. Second, the person's cosmology must have enough flexibility that they can deal with the challenge, uncertainty and mystery these accounts may bring.

Will this person respect my sincerity? Experiencers are not necessarily disturbed if a listener thoughtfully chooses an alternate explanation from the one the experiencer favors. It is important, however, that the listener accept that the experiencer is acting in a sincere and judicious manner when discussing this topic. From the experiencer's point of view there is no question, they are 'telling the truth.' They look for listeners who can embrace that presumption.

Will this person be able to appreciate how precious this experience is to me? Experiencers differ in their capacity to remain calm when faced with jocular reactions. With rare exceptions, however, this experience is deeply cherished by the experiencer. An experiencer who discloses does take the risk that the listener will not

appreciate that significance. It is disturbing, for example, to overhear listeners speak glibly afterwards, categorizing the experience as if shelving it neatly away. For instance, a woman had described her experience to a small group of friends at church. Afterwards she overheard some of the listeners spread the word to others with phrases like 'she had one of those experiences' and 'you ought to get her to tell you about it.' Feeling unhappy with that facile reaction, she found herself choosing listeners more carefully. Again and again this sentiment was echoed. Said another, "I regret sharing something with them that I cherish so much and they look at it the way they look at it, with no respect and no belief." Spouses sometimes infringe upon that hallowed sense of cherished treasure by talking more glibly about the experience than the experiencer does.

Experiencers drew on a collection of intuitive and observational means to answer these four questions about a prospective listener. Through a series of graduated topic relevancy, close listening, and careful observation of nonverbal behavior, experiencers hope to gather information about prospective listeners before actually disclosing the substance of their extramundane happening. These skills may have been clumsy during early disclosure interactions; unpleasant reactions led to a process of honing one's ability to test the waters beforehand.

"I do it in steps," explained one experiencer, "I don't suddenly just drop this on someone." Said another, "I take a little time to figure out where the person's coming from philosophically and religiously, and then I gear the way I talk about it to that." An experiencer who has been very open about discussing this says if the matter comes up at an inappropriate circumstance he says "'I'd be glad to talk to you about it, but not here.'" He added, "It seems to me if a person is truly interested in hearing about it, if it's not coming out of social nervousness or wanting somewhere to be at a party, then I'll hear back from them."

Knowing a person well enriches the information one has about their openness to these topics. As one woman phrased it, "you might be wrong, but you can tell by speaking with a person what they're thinking, where they're going, what they can accept, and what they won't accept." By initiating closely related topics and observing the person's attitude, one can move the topic more closely to near-death experiences, waiting again for a response check. A woman whose near-death experience occurred when she was a teenager paraphrased her typical pattern with this example.

> I don't talk, I listen before I invest much of myself and I started listening for clues to see if anyone was having these experiences, if those kinds of things were mentioned, and I may have kinda broached the broad subject with my family first, to see what kind of reaction I would get.

In addition to close listening and a series of topic 'trial balloons', experiencers report that nonverbal clues are a good source of unspoken, authentic attitude. One man spoke of looking closely into the eyes of the listener for hesitation and disbelief. When another experiencer spoke of seeing resistance, I asked her to be very specific. Her description follows.

> There is a physical thing that happens when a person is - I can see it happen. Their back gets a little bit straighter, [getting ready to] defend them. There's a look that comes across their eyes. You can see them observing you and watching you and making judgments. . . It's an observing look. It's not a being-with look. It's an observing look, and a judgment. You can see their mind going a mile a minute in the background.

When experiencers notice these signs of resistence, shallowness, or disrespect, they reassess their decision. One possible outcome which experiencers utilize at this point is an adept shift in topics. One man described this kind of circumstance:

> I got about halfway through the story ... they began chatting with each other, comparing notes on what I was telling compared to what they had heard from other people, and...I didn't finish the story. . . . [they] started to ask questions before I was halfway through the story, about did I see any auras around people--asking these kind of kooky qustions that people ask--and I thought, well I'm not interested in going anywhere...didn't finish the story.

Another experiencer talked of having a "shortened version" that he uses if the situation precludes a long discussion or if he is not on close terms with the listener. Other experiencers change the subject if they are unhappy with

the response. The fact that such distractions can be effective may confirm the suspicion that the listeners' interest was not serious.

I asked these experiencers what advice they might have for listeners who did want to hear this happening in its entirety. Genuine interest was mentioned as the key requirement and, as one experiencer succinctly noted, you can't feign genuine interest. "Either you are or you're not." Assuming sincere interest is present, however, the following suggestions were made by experiencers.

1) Don't interrupt the actual story. Wait until the end with questions. Especially don't cut off this narrative by beginning another similar story one has heard.

2) Take the happening on its own terms. Think about it. Process it. Imagine what it would mean if it happened to you.

3) Keep an open mind. Don't be quick to judge.

4) Be loving and accepting. Think with your heart.

5) Don't expect the events to necessarily fall into a tight sequence. Be patient. Give the person the time they need.

6) Silence is part of the ineffability. Stay in the silence with the experiencer. Resist the urge to hurry the story.

Cascading disclosures. Within disclosure research, little attention has been given to the way certain disclosures may be linked to one another. Researchers do know that among the variables that influence a judgment of appropriateness about disclosure is the issue of relevancy. As experiencers pointed out, the topic of their near-death event is rarely one they suddenly bring up in conversation. Related topics must plow the conversational ground before a near-death experience disclosure is contemplated.

News and media coverage about near-death experiences have increased during the past five years, providing greater opportunities for this topic to emerge in conversation. Recent movies like Ghost and television programs were mentioned during our research interviews as having precipitated a disclosure about one's near-death experience. When these media events are brought up among friends, experiencers are acutely aware of the relevancy of their happening.

Relevancy is not the only condition for disclosure, of course, but topic relevancy prompts the experiencer to consider the possibility of disclosure. As I asked these persons to articulate that decision process once relevancy was established, they and I were able to discover many of the variables discussed throughout this study. They acknowledged that critical factors like the openness of

the potential listeners, the level of trust between them, likelihood of satisfying their motive, and the ambiance of the occasion were quickly evaluated.

Because one's near-death experience happens in the midst of a physical crisis, however, discussions about that crisis topic can also shift the conversation in the direction where this disclosure might be relevant. Especially because one's near-death experience is a "limit-experience," to use Lane's (1988) description, contextual links are strong. Any mention of one aspect of the crisis event makes a disclosure about the other seem connected.

Physical crises vary greatly. Just to mention the more common categories, near-death experiences happen during acute illness, during life-threatening moments of surgery, following tragic accidents, in the midst of suicide attempts, and after violent attacks. The precipitating physical crises are themselves topics which carry connotations of stigma or innocence.

Among the persons who spoke to me about their near-death experience, violent acts (including a suicide attempt) were involved in 6 cases to some degree. Only 1 of those persons had spoken to more than 5 people about their near-death experience. This group was more concerned about anonymity than the rest of my experiencers. So intertwined are the two aspects of these

happenings that experiencers report that unwillingness to disclose one aspect entails some difficulty in disclosing the other. Listeners too seem to want the 'whole story' in order to understand the fullness of its meaning. One man, for instance, stipulated that I must ask no questions about the precipitating violence during the interview. I readily agreed, though that condition occluded several lines of inquiry. During a subsequent conversation, this man initiated a revelation about that violent circumstance and appeared to feel relieved that the 'whole story' was told.

On the other hand, the physical crisis's character might be such that it arises easily in conversation. Once again, an experiencer is aware that discussion of the physical circumstances makes disclosure of their near-death experience potentially relevant. Also on occasions like these, if another person in the group knows about one's near-death experience she or he might ask the experiencer to talk about it. Because one woman's experience occurred during childbirth, for instance, the subject of childbirth could prompt the relevancy of her story. Her husband, who knew about her near-death experience, would ask her to 'tell her story' at times like these. Recognizing that she must decide whether to talk about only the physical crisis or about the near-

death experience as well, this is the way she described her decision:

> And [husband] would say, 'tell them your story, tell them your story' you know, and I would be real hesitant to tell this story, and I would, most of the time I would tell the funny parts about the same doctors coming in and ...fire department. You know, we laughed about all that stuff, and I would be real hesitant, and most of the time I didn't tell the other part. And [husband] never pushed me to tell the other part. . . . I guess it would depend on how the spirit moved me, and if what kind of friends we were with and if I thought they would be receptive to hearing this, most of the time I didn't though.

When the precipitating physical crisis imposed lingering physical or functional disability, discussions about the cause of that disability also opened up occasions where one's near-death experience might be disclosed. One woman, a barber, was left with lingering memory problems after her extremely serious car accident. In explaining that memory loss to her regular customers, the names of whom she had trouble recalling, she often found herself talking about her near-death experience. Disabilities following accidents can have the same effect by creating topic relevancy when the accident itself is discussed.

This tendency of one disclosure to suddenly thrust a second disclosure into the foreground may be unique to "limit-experiences." This phenomenon has not been researched in detail. A near-death experience is intensely contextual, but perhaps other important or traumatic events contain similar cascading features. I

have termed these intricately linked disclosures 'cascading disclosures' to accent the powerful way that discussion of one crisis aspect necessitates a disclosure decision about the other.

Disclosure Satisfaction

In addition to an examination of disclosure decisions and patterns, this study aimed to investigate what experiencers need in order to feel satisfied with their disclosure interaction. I asked experiencers to recall both their most satisfying and their most dissatisfying disclosure interactions. Rather than unilateral responses, however, I found that satisfaction emerged from an intersection of motive and listener response. This section builds on earlier sections in which motive, patterns, and listener response were addressed.

Of all the motives for speaking about one's near-death experience, the desire to help others carries the least demands on listener response. In early disclosures experiencers may be pleasantly surprised how meaningful their willingness to disclose can be. Aside from these early experiences, however, once an experiencer discovers that their disclosures can powerfully assuage the fears of others they seem able to put reluctance aside. For these occasions, very little is required in the way of listener response besides a willingness to give the matter some serious attention. The experiencers I spoke with about

this were amazingly tolerant of disbelief, for example, often continuing this kind of disclosure even after unfavorable reactions.

When experiencers are disclosing to someone who represents a 'keeper of the record', the requirements for satisfaction are a bit higher. They need that listener to take them seriously and to treat the matter with due respect. If the person is not knowledgable about these kinds of experiences, a willingness to consider or investigate the matter is appreciated. On the other hand, careless or irresponsible remarks lead to dissatisfaction. Rejection causes not only dissatisfaction but also intense frustration. Experiencers may mitigate unhappiness in these cases by privately deriding that person's competency, but they are dissatisfied nonetheless.

When moved to disclose their extramundane happening for issues of integrity, experiencers hope to find an appreciation for the experience's meaning and significance in the listener in addition to genuine interest. A response that fails to affirm its value is likely to be interpreted as dissatisfying, although experiencers recognize that initial shock may lead to a muted reaction. In these circumstances, then, experiencers may differentiate between disconfirming, confirming, and neutral responses. Disconfirming responses, like remarks that indicate both disbelief and dismissal, bring the

greatest dissatisfaction. Neutral responses, while not satisfying, are sometimes accepted in the spirit of giving the listener time to adjust, just as the experiencer himself or herself remembers a period of initial surprise. Of course, when the listener is able to extend genuine belief and acknowledgement of the experience's importance, experiencers find the greatest satisfaction.

When experiencers disclose for the sake of exploration, they have usually been highly selective in choosing their listeners. Most typically, experiencers have had time to reflect privately before approaching another for this purpose. This motive is also accompanied by a posture of flexibility. Because unanswered questions or unsatisfactory past answers instigate this stage, they are willing to consider sincere comments from many points of view. They look for listeners who are seriously interested in these topics, willing to have a mutual discussion, and nondogmatic. If their assessment of the person's willingness, interest, or flexibility was in error, they are disappointed. Their dissatisfaction is not likely to be acute, however, unless their relationship with that person is centered around this particular need.

In this study, speaking about one's near-death experience for the purpose of sharing contact with that ineffable reality has been called anamnesis. This motive may only surface for those experiencers whose

extraordinary event involved contact with ineffable, numinous presence. For such experiencers in an initial state of euphoria, they may talk about their experience almost oblivious to listener response. After that initial stage, however, listeners are typically selective when this motive is their goal.

Experiencers seem to avert dissatisfaction by abbreviating their narrative if they sense unwillingness in their listener(s). Many experiencers flatly stated that they have never satisfied this goal because no one is capable of understanding this experience. Thus experiencers may refrain from discussing their extraordinary happening at length unless they trust their listener intimately. Others make these disclosure choices through a combination of close observation and intuition.

A near-death experience that includes contact with ineffable presence has "depth, not length" as one experiencer reported. Experiencers know that this kind of disclosure takes some time. It also involves a willingess on the part of listeners to participate in that intimate contact. As might be expected, a satisfying experience of anamnesis is as difficult to put into words as the original experience is. One experiencer, whose crisis occurred 20 years before, stated that she's told it often enough to be able to distinguish between telling it and "allowing it to be told." When she "allows it to be

told" some of that peace and joy enters the listeners. Struggling for words, almost whispering, she imparted this description of a satisfying anamnestic disclosure:

> Their, their, their eyes .....I think it's most evident ...when they...there's not, it's real hard to explain, it's like .....looking through the world through the saran wrap. It's crystal clear, you can see through it. . . . . See into their soul. You almost kind of feel like a oneness.

In contrast, a dissatisfying response is described with these words:

> There's a veil, you know, the distance that we keep between ourselves and virtually everybody around us. . . . It's like the barrier doesn't come down. {Even within yourself?} Yeah, it doesn't come down within me, you know, it's like the story bounces back into myself, it never gets out.

Nondisclosure, Secrecy and Disclosure Depth

The reported disclosure habits included in this study ranged from 'no prior disclosures' at one end to 'disclosing often' at the other. In almost every case reported disclosures discussed in this study occurred between these experiencers and non-experiencers. Very few had ever spoken about their extraordinary happening with another experiencer.

At the beginning of this study, disclosure was viewed in unilateral terms. As this investigation continued, however, I discovered that disclosure depth varied greatly during these reported interactions. Except for those uncommon near-death experiences that contain few affective, cognitive, or transcendental elements, these

extraordinary happenings may be recounted on a number of levels. In the majority of cases, then, a 'facts-only' rendition leaves much undisclosed. Thus many disclosure interactions were in fact a mixture of disclosed material and material still held in secret.

Earlier in this study I noted that communication researchers have not addressed the potential benefits that decisions of secrecy may accrue, although they have expounded the benefits of self-disclosure at great length. Throughout this investigation I have closely observed not only disclosure decisions in themselves, but the particular blend of disclosure and secrecy embedded in these decisions. I have also tried to distinguish, as best as I could through self-report and observation, between decisions of secrecy that appeared to bring strain/or stressful isolation to the individual and those that were experienced as nurturing. It is this distinction that I want to explicate in this section.

Especially for those individuals who have not heard about near-death experiences before their own, experiencers report that their perceived singularity is a source of stressful preoccupation. Even when they manage to push the happening into the back of their minds, that moment when they first read or heard a similar report is remembered as a cathartic event. One experiencer, for instance, suppressed the extraordinary happening for about

two years until he was watching a documentary about children's near-death experiences. "That affected me so deeply, it shook me so badly, because they described what I saw, what I experienced. I mean it was death, the description was death." Realizing that now he had to deal with this happening, he was unable to go to sleep. His wife could tell he was upset, so he talked to her about his experience.

Some experiencers respond to this first corroboration with exhilaration rather than shock. In both cases, that first confirmation was accompanied by a release of energy and it was typically followed shortly afterwards by an interpersonal disclosure. I am convinced that perceived singularity in a extramundane happening of this magnitude is experienced as stressful.

Experiencers report more concern about reactions of ridicule in their early disclosure practices about this subject. They wonder if others can possibly understand or accept the importance it has for them. Experiencers want to avoid responses that devalue this experience, at least until such time that their own relationship with the experience is secure and fully developed. Early experiences with ridicule, if they occur, contribute to a learning process of listener selection.

At the end of the interview, each experiencer was asked to indicate the frequency with which they talked

about this experience. The choices were: never, rarely, occasionally, frequently, and often. Each individual was also asked to rate their desire to describe the experience by choosing among five possibilities: very strong, strong, moderate, slight, and no desire. For 15 individuals, the indicated frequency ratings were at least 2 levels below the indicated desire to talk. There seems to be every indication that for some experiencers their desire to talk about this event is not matched by equivalent levels of disclosure practices.

Disclosure prefaces, those discourse processes through which experiencers explore listener receptivity before beginning a disclosure, help experiencers avoid specific instances of dissatisfaction. From these experiencers' reports, however, disclosure desire may be strong many years after a near-death experience.

On the other hand, it is clear that discussing the 'facts' of one's near-death experience seldom represents a complete disclosure. After the interview, each respondent was also asked to complete two scales, WCEI and NDE SCALE, in which they indicated the presence of specific elements within their near-death experience. It was not unusual for these persons to circle an element which in fact had never been mentioned during their narrative. There seemed to be no strain involved in acknowledging that element's inclusion. I felt I had glimpsed a cherished

dimension of the experience that they may or may not be ready to describe. Most typically these later revelations involved elements of sudden understanding, or aspects of a mystical or affective nature.

Experiencers also grapple with the question, who does this experience belong to? While it may seem obvious that a private experience belongs to the individual alone, this question is not so easily answered for near-death experiences. Portions of the experience seem destined to have meaning only for the individual involved. Experiencers suspect, however, that their experience has the potential to benefit others as well. To the extent that it belongs only to them, secrecy is warranted. To the extent that the benefits belong to all, disclosure is necessitated. Differentiating between these arenas of ownership and identifying effective disclosure opportunities requires reflection, practice, and time.

Most experiencers cherish their experience. One manifestation of that attitude is selectivity in disclosure content as well as careful choice of listeners. These experiencers enjoy recalling the experience privately. Its memory is held in protected space, and the energy spent visiting that space in memory nourishes the experience's vitality.

Near-death experiences like these are treasured not as static, past events but as continuing and treasured

parts of their lives. One businessman, speaking nearly five years after his crisis, stated that he enjoyed thinking about the extraordinary happening and recalled it "every day of my life!" "It's burned into me, seared into me," he declared. A nurse who had hovered near death for 12 days after contact with an infected patient expressed her attitude with these words: "How was I so lucky to be allowed to see this? to go through this? . . . I would not exchange that time in my life for anything. It was one of the most precious times in my life."

Experiencers represented by these attitudes have no desire to close the chapter on this happening nor to dissipate its power in trifling disclosure. Two persons mentioned the proverb 'don't cast your pearls before swine.' Another experiencer who seldom talks about it said "trying to tell it to you trivializes it. And it isn't trivial. It's profound. I mean, it's awesome." Near-death experiencers would agree with Tournier (1963/1965) when he wrote that "a certain secrecy, to just the right extent, ought to enclose every precious thing, every precious experience, so that it can mature and bear fruit" (p. 19).

Summary

Disclosure expands the boundaries within which an experience is harbored. Essentially, disclosure about near-death experiences moves that happening from an inner

sanctum where one's assertion of its reality can be privately held to the interactional world where its reality may be contested.

After these interviews I have come to believe that disclosing one's near-death experience represents a commitment to bring an intimate, private experience into the public arena. As such, disclosure has important symbolic significance insofar as it marks a shift in one's relationship to private experience.

In this chapter I presented the results of my inquiries about disclosure decisions and patterns. I examined disclosure motives and described five motive clusters. A section on disclosure patterns addressed initial disclosures and disclosure trends during post-experience adjustment. Also in this section I discussed my single interview about a distressing near-death experience.

After sections on disclosure motives and patterns, several factors which directly shape disclosure options were delineated. A section on disclosure satisfaction highlighted the intersection of motive and listener response that contributes to experiencers' evaluation of the disclosure occasion. Finally, I concluded this chapter with a discussion of nondisclosure and secrecy as the two are intertwined in disclosures about near-death experiences.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS

Within the field of communication theory, self-disclosure research has a long and productive tradition. Much research into this subject, however, has been conducted through efforts that isolate the components of self-disclosure and/or separate disclosure from its complex ecological dimensions. As Chelune (1979) noted, communication scholars need to design investigations that "decrease the phenomenological gap between self-disclosure as defined by the scientific method and the self-disclosure experienced by people in day-to-day life" (p. 2).

This study attempts to reduce that gap by investigating disclosure decisions about a major life experience through the thick perspectives of the individuals themselves. Disclosure is a complex human process embedded within multifarious human interaction. From the perspective of the functioning individual, some semblance of implicit order exists. Individuals may be only dimly aware of the structures and patterns they have incorporated into these disclosure processes.

I chose a methodology for this investigation that holds promise for making sense out of these interaction thickets. While ethnographic methods have been primary

tools in the cultural anthropologist's craft for decades, scholars have turned their focus more recently to intense development of these methodologies. With ethnographic methods, understanding comes from the routine and the unexpected, from successful interactions and from mistakes. Keeping eyes and ears ever open for insights, ethnographers know that the richest litmus test is their ability to function well in the world they once entered as a participant/observer.

For a year I regularly participated in long conversations with individuals who survived a life-threatening crisis and returned with an extraordinary account of extramundane experience. In the beginning I felt awkward, self-conscious, and naive when talking with near-death experiencers about this remarkable happening. Amidst awkwardness, mistakes, and persistence, my ability to function as a listener grew as I encountered diverse disclosure motives, shifting experience content, and distinct disclosure histories.

This study aimed for a deeper understanding of disclosure as <u>process</u> by including a full range of cognitive and behavioral activities in its purview. In addition, this investigation focused on a particular disclosure topic that fitted the psychiatric definition of trauma: an emotional experience, or shock, which has a lasting psychic effect. By examining disclosure decisions

about a pivotal experience, I hoped to contribute to that research corpus which specifically examines the obstacles and benefits of important disclosures.

Within this study some earlier research findings were confirmed. For instance, the critical role of listener response for early disclosures was supported. Pennebaker and Susman (1988) noted that "long-term negative psychological and physical effects" have been found among incest victims when they are denounced by those in whom they confided. In this study also, individuals vividly recalled early disclosure rejections and cited its destructive shadow over subsequent disclosure decisions. Individuals appear to be especially vulnerable during initial disclosures and/or with persons who represent authority.

My observations also coincided with the findings of Pennebaker and associates (Pennebaker, 1989; Pennebaker & Susman, 1988) regarding the vital role of bringing both thoughts and emotions into major event-narratives for full "confrontation." When near-death experiencers recounted their experience through a facts-only rendition and described that as their habitual approach, they did not appear to progress toward experience integration. I was reminded of Lane's (1988) observation that sacred ground can be tread upon without being entered. Similarly, persons who remained on the level of emotional expression

seemed hampered in meaningful exploration about the experience. As Pennebaker (1989) notes, emphasizing the combination of thoughts and feelings differs from the "sole expression of pent-up emotions" (p. 232). Those subjects in Pennebaker's studies whose disclosures included both thoughts and feelings exhibited the greatest physiological benefit.

Brockhoeft's (1979) investigation found that disclosure intimacy was significantly related ($p = .01$) to specific qualities in the listener. He reported that persons are not likely to reveal intimate information to persons acting in a distant/nonaccepting manner or in a pleasant but essentially indifferent manner. The willingness to disclosure intimate matter depends on warmth and acceptance in the listener. Within this study, I noted that a near-death experience is a combination of facts-sequence elements and those elements which represent greater intimacy. Selection criteria for event-sequence accounts were not as demanding as those listener qualities that were reportedly required for a full disclosure of facts and emotions. This finding has implications for those professionals who maintain a 'distance' in their demeanor.

Because listener qualities seem to occupy such a pivotal role in disclosure selection, a closed circle effect may occur with regard to these revelations. Those

who are perceived as accepting may receive many disclosures. On the other hand, those who are perceived as closed or disinterested in these matters may seldom have the opportunity in which that perspective can be changed. One consequence of this trend may be increased isolation for experiencers as well as continuing nescience for disinterested non-experiencers.

An example of this disclosure mechanism occurred in the work of Dr. Sabom, the cardiologist who conducted a hospital-centered investigation into near-death experiences. When he first heard about near-death experiences from a social worker, Sabom dismissed the reports. As he characterized his rationale later, Sabom noted that he had resuscitated hundreds of patients and never heard a single report of this kind. As soon as he began pulling up a chair beside his patients' beds and asking about these matters, however, Sabom found that these experiences were numerous. Until Sabom changed his own behavioral manifestations of interest, he was not selected as a listener for these accounts despite his obvious close involvement with each of these patients.

Through this study I hoped to untangle that network of observed reticence and willingness concerning near-death experiencers' disclosures. With the exception of the single interview involving a distressing near-death experience, I would describe experiencers as welcoming the

opportunity to discuss this happening. Though aspects of the interview involved memories of their physical suffering, the peace and assurance of their near-death experiences overshadowed that distress. Experiencers reported that opportunities to talk about this happening served to reinforce that assurance. Furthermore, discussing this experience made more concrete the connection between the extraordinary happening and their everyday lives.

Because this experience came unbidden, no sense of personal shame or responsibility clouded these persons' relationships with their experiences. Any hesitancy to discuss this happening does not originate from a reluctance to re-visit this place in memory. It is more accurate to interpret that hesitancy as uncertainty about the listener's response.

Experiencers who met with me were more likely to experience reluctance in those circumstances when dissatisfaction was anticipated. For those experiencers who encountered rejection or indifference to early disclosure and for those who had never encountered a satisfying conversation about this experience, anticipation of dissatisfaction was greater. On the other hand, if persons do not anticipate such dissatisfaction they are not hesitant to speak about this experience. Previous awareness of near-death experiences may play an

important role in mitigating one's anticipation of dissatisfying reactions. Very young children may speak openly about these happening at first since they have not yet detected a cultural taboo about paranormal matters. Those experiencers whose disclosure history on this topic included satisfactory interactions were not hesitant to speak about this experience. They may remain highly selective, however, about listeners and occasions.

Over the long term, disclosure experiences shape selection criteria in order to increase satisfying opportunities and avoid dissatisfying ones. It must also be noted that while early responses of rejection or indifference may heighten selection criteria, early disclosure encounters that are evaluated as deeply satisfying seem to have the opposite effect. Among experiencers who reported deeply satisfying and intimate conversations about this happening, a robust resilience to later dissatisfying interactions emerged. This observation suggests that deeply satisfying disclosure interactions may endow powerful benefits.

I also emerged from this exploration with some specific findings about disclosure. For the disclosures described in this study, revelation is a complex, multi-stage process which may include any or all of the following activities: scanning the comments and attitudes of potential listeners, sending out 'trial balloons' by

mentioning related topics, emitting a disclosure 'preface' to plumb listener interest, beginning with a short narrative about the event, planning exit points from the topic, and evaluating the interaction afterwards. As I became more attuned to these interaction nuances, I learned to recognize these overtures as invitations which required a response from me before the next step could occur.

I learned, however, to surrender the pace of disclosure to the experiencer. Excessive eagerness or curiosity does seem related to issues of power. As such these particular listener attitudes may be interpreted as usurpations. In context-embedded matters of significance and intimacy like near-death experiences, individuals exhibit a need to control both what they divulge and the pace of that revelation. Listener interruptions, hurried gestures, or premature questions are not welcomed and may lead to disclosure termination and/or abbreviation.

Some aspects of disclosure decisions emerged in this study that merit further exploration. The decision to initiate a major disclosure is characterized as being a distinct process from responding to direct inquiries with disclosure. Perhaps matters of integrity and relevancy are increased in the latter condition. More research into this aspect is needed.

For disclosures about context-embedded events, the effect of closely-related events on disclosure willingness is largely unexplored. Within this study I observed the power of these related events to increase or decrease disclosure readiness. Some disclosures seem to catapult adjacent events into enhanced relevancy, thereby complicating the disclosure decision. Communication researchers have not written in depth about these cascading disclosure phenomena.

Finally, this study brings the topic of secrecy into more prominence in our examination of disclosure decisions. Within this study, a vital distinction is made between private information and secret information. Much private material is of no importance or interest to another. A personal secret, on the other hand, involves private information about the self which is judged to be of interest or importance to another but is not revealed for reasons other than lack of opportunity.

Concealment is the default condition for private experience. The inner, private world of thoughts, feelings, and experiences can only be known if and when the individual chooses to reveal those matters. Self-disclosure about major events involves degrees of revelation and often includes degrees of secrecy as well.

Pennebaker (1989) acknowledged his distress when he discovered how much destructive trauma his participants

had endured. Noting that his participants were largely upper-middle-class students at a selective private school, Pennebaker suspects that among the population at large "an even higher rate of problems" (p. 220) would be found. He was further alarmed by the degree to which individuals "held back from telling others about these fundamental parts of themselves" (p. 212).

In discussing secrecy, it is essential to distinguish between guarded material that involves a sense of treasure or value from that which represents a source of embarrassment, guilt, violation, or shame. This distinction is not necessarily a straightforward matter. In either case, however, protective barriers are established. Pennebaker and associates (Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988; Pennebaker & Susman, 1988; Pennebaker, 1989, 1990) attempt to track the physiological cost of that protection. From the individual's perspective, protection is a continuous process. Once the judgment of interest or importance is made about private material, individuals have the labor of managing that protective shield.

Among near-death experiencers who have especially strong paranormal elements within their extraordinary happening, the desire to talk about this is especially strong. These experiencers sometimes reported that withholding those revelations (or having those reports

rebuffed or ignored) constituted a kind of psychological distress. Some near-death experiences, then, leave behind traumatic residues which may deplete psychological resources if satisfactory resolution does not occur. Supportive disclosure interactions serve as one possible step in that resolution process.

This study also suggests, however, that secrecy--to a greater or lesser degree--is viewed as one means of guarding precious experience. It seems reasonable to suggest that this protection process also involves an exchange of psychological and/or physiological energy. However, when the guarded area is fragile, treasured, and unlikely to be valued by others, secrecy can be an act of self-nourishment. As Khan (1983) noted, a secret may function as "potential space," encapsulating a valued part of oneself that cannot exist safely in the everyday world. In these cases, secrecy acts as incubation in which the treasured aspect of self is nourished until it gathers enough strength to emerge from that cocoon.

Distinguishing between secrets that deplete and secrets that nourish is of vital importance. This judgment demands perceptive self-awareness as well as accurate assessment of potential listeners' responses. That distinction is also a matter of immediate consequence for disclosure decisions and processes. This issue merits further investigation in communication research.

REFERENCES

Adler, R. B., Rosenfeld, L. B., & Towne, N. (1986). Interplay: The procesws of interpersonal communication (3rd ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Agar, M. H. (1985). Speaking of ethnography. Sage University Paper Series on Qualitative Research Methods, Volume 2. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Altman, I. (1977). Privacy regulation: Culturally universal or culturally specific? Journal of social Issues, 33 (3), 66-84.

Atwater, P. M. H. (1988). Coming back to life: The aftereffects of the near-death experience. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co.

Bensman, J., & Lilienfeld, R. (1979). Between public and private: The lost boundaries of the self. New York: The Free Press.

Bok, S. (1983). Secrets. New York: Random House.

Bradac, J. J., Tardy, C. H., & Hosman, L. A. (1980). Disclosure styles and a hint of their genesis. Human Communication Research, 6, 228-238.

Briggs, C. L. (1986). Learning how to ask. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brockhoeft, W. J. (1979). The relationship between self-disclosure and various aspects of mental health as a function of the interpersonal situation in which disclosure occurs (Doctoral dissertation, Louisiana State University, 1979). Dissertation Abstracts International, 40, 2828B.

Chaikin, A. L., & Derlega, B. J. (1974). Variables affecting the appropriateness of self-disclosure. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 42, 588-593.

Chelune, G. J. (1976). A multidimensional look at sex and target differences in disclosure. Psychological Reports, 39, 259-263.

Chelune, G. J. (1979). Measuring openness in interpersonal communication. In G. J. Chelune (Ed.), Self-disclosure: Origins, patterns, and implications of

openness in interpersonal relationships (pp. 1-27). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cumes, D. P. (1983). Hypertension, disclosure of personal concerns, and blood pressure response. Journal of Clinical Psychology, 39, 376-381.

Dattel, A. R., & Neimeyer, R. A. (1990). Sex differences in death anxiety: Testing the emotional expressiveness hypothesis. Death Studies, 14, 1-11.

Derlega, V. J., & Chaikin, A. L. (1977). Privacy and self-disclosure in social relationships. Journal of Social Issues, 33(3), 102-115.

Freeman, C. (1985). Near-death experiences: Implications for medical personnel. Occupational Health Nursing, 33, 349-359.

Fritz, G. K., Williams, J. R., & Amylon, M. (1988). After treatment ends: Psychosocial sequelae in pediatric cancer survivors. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 58, 552-561.

Gallup, G. (1982). Adventures in immortality. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Goffman, E. (1959). The presentation of self in everyday life. New York: Doubleday.

Greyson, B. (1983a). The near-death experience scale. Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 171, 369-375.

Greyson, B. (1983b). Near-death experiences and personal values. American Journal of Psychiatry, 140, 618-620.

Greyson, B., & Bush, N. E. (1992). Distressing near-death experiences. Psychiatry, 55, 95-110.

Gudykunst, W. B., & Ting-Toomey, S. (1988). Culture and interpersonal communication. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (1983). Ethnography: Principles in practice. New York: Tavistock Publications.

Harding, S. F. (1987). Convicted by the holy spirit: The rhetoric of fundamental Baptist conversion. American Ethnologist, 14, 167-181.

Hawkins, P., & Schotter, A. (1984). Ineffability. New York: AMS Press.

Hill, C. T., & Stull, D. E. (1982). Disclosure reciprocity: Conceptual and measurement issues. Social Psychology Quarterly, 45, 238-244.

Hoffman, R. (1992, August). Recounting sacred experience. Paper presented at the Ethnography of Communication Conference, Portland, OR.

Hosman, L. A., & Tardy, C. H. (1980). Self-disclosure and reciprocity in short- and long-term relationships: An experimental study of evaluational and attributional consequence. Communication Quarterly, 28, 20-30.

Jourard, S. M. (1966). Some psychological aspects of privacy. Law and Contemporary Problems, 31, 307-318.

Jourard, S. M. (1968). Disclosing man to himself. Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand.

Jourard, S. M. (1971). The transparent self (2nd ed.). New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Jourard, S. M. (1979). Self-disclosure: An experimental analysis of the transparent self. Huntington, NY: Robert E. Krieger.

Jourard, S. M., & Landsman, T. (1980). Healthy personality: An approach from the viewpoint of humanistic psychology (4th ed.). New York: Macmillan.

Jung, C. (1963). Memories, dreams, and reflections (R. and C. Winstron, Trans.). New York: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1961).

Kalweit, H. (1988). Dreamtime and inner space (W. Wunsche, Trans.). Boston: Shambhala. (Original work published 1984).

Khan, M. M. (1983). Hidden selves: Between theory and practice in psychoanalysis. New York: International Universities Press.

Lane, B. C. (1988). Landscapes of the sacred. New York: Paulist Press.

Laufer, R. S., & Wolfe, M. (1977). Privacy as a concept and social issue: A Multidimensional developmental theory. Journal of Social Issues, 33(3), 22-42.

MacIver, R. M. (Ed.). (1952). Conflict of loyalties. New York: Institute of Religious and Social Studies.

Mathews, B. (1989). The use of therapist self-disclosure and its potential impact on the therapeutic process. Journal of Human Behavior and Learning, 6(2), 25-29.

McCracken, G. (1988). The long interview (Sage University Paper Series on Qualitative Research Methods, Vol. 13). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Moody, R. A. (1975). Life after life. Covington, GA: Mockingbird Books.

Moody, R. A. (1977). Reflections on life after life. Covington, GA: Mockingbird Books.

Moody, R. A. (1988). The light beyond. New York: Bantam Books.

Morse, M. (1990). Closer to the light: Learning from the near-death experiences of children. New York: Random House.

Morse, M., Castillo, P., Venecia, D., Milstein, J., & Tyler, D. (1986). Childhood near-death experiences. American Journal of Diseases of Children, 140, 1110-1114.

Morse, M., Conner, D., & Tyler, D. (1985). Near-death experiences in a pediatric population. American Journal of Diseases of Children, 139, 595-600.

Neihardt, J. G. (1972). Black Elk speaks. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Otto, R. (1958). The idea of the holy. New York: Oxford University Press.

Park, R. E. (1950). Race and culture. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

Park, R. E., & Burgess, E. W. (1969). Introduction to the science of sociology. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Pedersen, D. M. (1979). Dimensions of privacy. Perceptual and Motor Skills, 48, 1291-1297.

Pedersen, D. M. (1988). Correlates of privacy regulation. Perceptual and Motor Skills, 66, 595-601.

Pedersen, D. M., & Higbee, K. L. (1969). Personality correlates of self-disclosure. The Journal of Social Psychology, 78, 81-89.

Pennachio, J. (1986). Near-death experience as mystical experience. Journal of Religion and Health, 25, 64-72.

Pennebaker, J. W. (1989). Confession, inhibition, and disease. Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 22, 211-244.

Pennebaker, J. W. (1990). Opening up: The healing power of confiding in others. New York: William Morrow.

Pennebaker, J. W., Kiecolt-Glaser, J. K., & Glaser, R. (1988). Disclosure of traumas and immune function: Health implications for psychotherapy. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 56, 239-245.

Pennebaker, J. W., & Susman, J. R. (1988). Disclosure of traumas and psychosomatic processes. Social Science & Medicine, 26, 327-332.

Petronio, S., Martin, J., & Littlefield, R. (1984). Prerequisite conditions for self-disclosing: A gender issue. Communication Monographys, 51, 268-273.

Prager, K. J., Fuller, D. O., & Gonzalez, A. S. (1989). The function of self-disclosure in social interaction. Journal of Social Behavior and Personality, 4, 563-580.

Quimby, S. L. (1989). The near-death experience as an event in consciousness. Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 29(1), 87-108.

Raft, D., & Andresen, J. J. (1986). Transformations in self-understanding after near-death experiences. Contemporary Psychoanalysis, 22, 319-340.

Rawlins, W. K. (1983). Openness as problematic in ongoing friendships: Two conversational dilemmas. Communication Monographs, 50, 1-13.

Ring, K. (1982). Life at death: A scientific investigation of the near-death experience. New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan.

Ring, K. (1985). Heading toward omega: In search of the meaning of the near-death experience. New York: William Morrow.

Ring, K. (1989). Near-death and UFO encounters as shamanic initiations: Some conceptual and evoluationary implictions. ReVision, 11(3), 14-22.

Ring, K. (1991). Amazing grace: The near-death experience as a compensatory gift. Journal of Near-Death Studies, 10(1), 11-39.

Rossiter, C. (1958). The pattern of liberty. In M. R. Konvitz and C. Rossiter (Eds.), Aspects of liberty (pp. 15-32). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Rosenfeld, L. B., & Kendrick, W. L. (1984). Choosing to be open: An empirical investigation of subjective reasons for self-disclosing. The Western Journal of Speech Communication, 48, 326-343.

Royse, D. (1985). The near-death experience: A survey of clergy's attitudes and knowledge. Journal of Pastoral Care, 39(1), 31-42.

Sabom, M. B. (1982). Recollections of death: A medical investigation. New York: Harper & Row.

Schwartz, K. (1989, January 31). Discussing disease openly good for patient, doctor says. Morning Advocate, p. 2D.

Silver, A. S. (1986). Discussion. Contemporary Psychoanalysis, 22, 346-356.

Simmel, G. (1950). The sociology of Georg Simmel (Trans. & Ed. by K. H. Wolfe). Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

Singer, J. (1972). Boundaries of the soul: The practice of Jung's psychology. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Smith, M. J. (1988). Contemporary communication research methods. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.

Spradley, J. P. (1980). Participant observation. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Tardy, C. H., Hosman, L. A., & Bradac, J. J. (1981). Disclosing self to friends and family: A reexamination of initial questions. Communication Quarterly, 29, 263-268.

Taylor, D. A. (1979). Motivation bases. In G. J. Chelune (Ed.), Self-disclosure: Origins, patterns, and implictions of opennes in interpersonal relationships. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Tefft, S. K. (Ed.). Secrecy: A cross-cultural perspective. New York: Human Sciences Press.

Tournier, P. (1965). Secrets (J. Embry, Trans.). Richmond, VA: John Knox Press. (Original work published 1963).

Waring, E. M. (1990). Self-disclosure of personal constructs. Family Process, 29, 399-413.

Warren, C., & Laslett, B. (1977). Privacy and secrecy: A conceptual comparison. Journal of Social Issues, 33(3), 43-51.

Webster's unabridged dictionary. (1983). New York: New World Dictionaries/Simon & Schuster.

Weiner, M. F. (1983). Therapist self-disclosure: The use of self in psychotherapy (2nd ed.). Baltimore: University Park Press.

Westin, A. F. (1967). Privacy and freedom. New York: Atheneum.

Wheeless, L. R. (1978). A follow-up study of the relationships among trust, disclosure, and interpersonal solidarity. Human Communication Research, 4, 143-157.

Zaleski, C. (1987). Otherworld journeys: Accounts of near-death experience in medieval and modern times. New York: Oxford University Press.

APPENDIX A

RESEARCH PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Perhaps you have experienced a near-death crisis, and during that crisis you also experienced some of the following happenings: being outside of your body, passing through a dark tunnel, seeing a being of light, or facing a decision about returning to this world.

If these events have occurred to you, I would like to ask you to help me with my dissertation project. I am completing my Ph.D. at L.S.U. in Communication Studies, and I need to interview people who have had a near-death experience. The focus of my research is on the decisions people make to talk about their unusual experience or not to talk about it. I am interested in interviewing persons who <u>have not talked</u> about their experience as well as people who <u>have discussed</u> their near-death experience with others. Naturally, your identity will be held in the strictest confidence.

I can be reached at [phone number]. Please leave a message if you reach my answering machine and I will return your call. Thanks.

APPENDIX B

POOL OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe your emotional state when you first regained consciousness. Did you want to talk about your unusual experience then? Who was present? What was the setting? Did you talk about it? If yes, describe the response.
2. Since that time, to whom have you described the experience? Clergy? Medical Personnel? Mental Health Professional? Family? Friends? Someone who's also had a NDE? Someone who is struggling with illness or death himself?
3. Recall a time when you were most satisfied with your conversation about this experience..describe in detail. What was the setting? What impact did your story seem to have on the listener/s? How would you describe the listener's response?
4. Recall a time when you were dissatisfied with your conversation ..describe in detail. What was the setting? What impact did your story seem to have on the listener/s? How would you describe the listener's response?
5. What risks do you face in talking about this? Envy, ridicule, loss of credibility or reputation?
6. What benefits result from talking about this experience? What are your reasons for wanting to talk about it?

7. Is ineffability a problem? How do you adapt your story so that it will be meaningful to the listener? Do you use metaphors? Do you worry about maintaining the freshness of this narrative?

8. Do you at any time feel that you are reliving certain aspects of the near-death experience as you talk about it? If yes, which aspects? Emotions? Presence of spirits or being of light? Immediacy of the event? Does talking about the experience ever lead to new insights into the experience's meaning? Do you find that you sometimes recall parts of the event during such a description which you had forgotten?

9. Do you feel any sense of obligation to speak about your experience if, for example, you were talking with a person who was seriously ill or fearful of death? On the other hand, would you consider it appropriate to offer your story as a source of entertainment?

10. Is there someone you want to talk to about this, but you feel you cannot? Is there anyone you would specifically not want to talk with about this happening?

11. How do you explain this experience to yourself: as a real happening, or a dream, or a hallucination? Does it make a difference to you if the listener believes this really happened? Does the listener's belief make the telling more satisfying?

12. Has the media coverage made it easier or more difficult to talk about your experience? Give an example or explain.

13. What advice would you give to a person about listening to someone talk about their near-death experience?

14. Why did you contact (or agree to meet) me?

APPENDIX C

DEMOGRAPHIC AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

1)Age 2)Sex 3)Race 4)Yrs Education

5)Occupation 6)Marital Status 6)Religious affiliation

7)Frequency of Church attendance (circle one):

none less than monthly 1-3 times a month weekly

8)How long ago was your near-death event?

9)Age at time of NDE?

10)Cause of Crisis:

Illness Accident Suicide Attempt Other_____

11)Were you familiar with the Near-Death experience in general before your own experience occurred? No Yes

Please explain.

APPENDIX D

DISCLOSURE AND EVALUATION OF EXPERIENCE

Give your best estimate of how many persons to whom you have described this experience in some detail? _____

1) How would you rate your near-death experience in terms of its positive or negative qualities?

5 - strongly negative

4 - moderately negative

3 - both negative and positive

2 - moderately positive

1 - strongly positive

2) How would you rate the significance of this experience in your life?

5 - little or no significance

4 - somewhat significant

3 - moderately significant

2 - strongly significant

1 - the most significant experience of my life

3) Indicate the desire to which you hold back from talking with others about this experience.

5 - I never discuss this

4 - I rarely discuss this

3 - I occasionally discuss this

2 - I frequently discuss this

1 - I often discuss this

4) If the circumstances were completely comfortable for you, how would you describe your desire to describe this experience?

5 - I have a very strong desire to talk about this

4 - I have a strong desire to talk about this

3 - I have a moderate desire to talk about this

2 - I have a slight desire to talk about this

1 - I have no desire to talk about this

APPENDIX E

WEIGHTED CORE EXPERIENCE INDEX (WCEI)

Answer the following questions with your own experience in mind. Circle the response which best fits your experience.

1. Subjective sense of being dead	1 = Yes 0 = No
2. Feelings of peace, painlessness, pleasantness, etc.	2 = Strong feelings of peace & pleasantness 1 = Relief or Calmness 0 = Neither
3. Sense of bodily separation	2 = Clearly out of my physical body 1 = No longer aware of of physical body 0 = No sense of bodily separation
4. Sense of entering a dark region	2 = Yes, with movement as well 1 = Yes 0 = No
5. Encountering a presence/ hearing a voice	1 = Yes 0 = No
6. Taking stock of one's life	1 = Yes 0 = No
7. Seeing, or being enveloped in, light	1 = Yes 0 = No
8. Seeing Beautiful colors	1 = Yes 0 = No
9. Entering into the light	1 = Yes 0 = No
10. Encountering visible 'spirits'	1 = Yes 0 = No

Note: Responses are multiplied times the weight allotted for that question according to the following scale:

#1-[1] #2-[2] #3-[2] #4-[2] #5-[3] #6-[3] #7-[2] #8-[1] #9-[4] #10-[3]

Highest possible score = 29

APPENDIX F

NDE SCALE

1.	Did time seem to speed up?	2 = Everything seemed to be happening all at once 1 = Time seemed to go faster than usual 0 = Neither
2.	Were your thoughts speeded up?	2 = Incredibly fast 1 = Faster than usual 0 = Neither
3.	Did scenes from your past come back to you?	2 = Past flashed before me out of my control 1 = Remembered many past events 0 = Neither
4.	Did you suddenly seem to understand everything?	2 = About the universe 1 = About myself 0 = Neither
5.	Did you have a feeling of peace or pleasantness?	2 = Incredible peace or pleasantness 1 = Relief or calmness 0 = Neither
6.	Did you have a feeling of joy?	2 = Incredible joy 1 = Happiness 0 = Neither
7.	Did you feel a sense of harmony or unity with the universe?	2 = United, one with the world 1 = No longer in conflict with nature 0 = Neither
8.	Did you see or feel surrounded by a brilliant light?	2 = Light clearly of mystical or other-wordly origin 1 = Unusually bright light 0 = Neither
9.	Were your senses more vivid than normal?	2 = Incredibly more so 1 = More so than usual 0 = Neither

10. Did you seem to be aware of things going on elsewhere, as if by ESP?	2 = Yes, and facts later later corroborated 1 = Yes, but facts not yet corroborated 0 = Neither
11. Did scenes from the future come to you?	2 = From the world's future 1 = From personal future 0 = Neither
12. Did you feel separated from your physical body?	2 = Clearly left the body and existed outside of it 1 = Lost awareness of the body 0 = Neither
13. Did you seem to enter some other unearthly world?	2 = Clearly mystical or unearthly realm 1 = Unfamiliar, strange place 0 = Neither
14. Did you seem to encounter a mystical being or presence?	2 = Definite being, or voice clearly of mystical or other-worldly origin 1 = Unidentifiable voice 0 = Neither
15. Did you see deceased spirits or religious figures?	2 = Saw them 1 = Sensed their presence 0 = Neither
16. Did you come to a border or point of no return?	2 = A barrier I was not permitted to cross; or "sent back" to life involuntarily 1 = A conscious decision to "return" to life 0 = Neither

VITA

Regina M. Doyle Hoffman was born to Joseph Patrick and LaVerne McKune Doyle on November 15, 1948 in Louisville, Kentucky. She was educated in the Catholic school system in Louisville through high school. She graduated from the University of Louisville in August 1970 where she majored in English and minored in Chemistry.

In April 1969, she married Randy Hoffman and moved later that year to Hampton, Virginia where Randy was stationed with the U.S. Air Force. From September 1970 to June 1971, she taught chemistry, physical science, and earth science at Peninsula Catholic High School in Newport News, Virginia.

Following the births of her children, Jennifer, Beth, and Ryan, she attended graduate school in the Masters of Information Systems Degree Program at West Virginia College of Graduate Studies during the 1981 academic year. She worked as a computer analyst from January 1982 through July 1986, first at E.S.I. in Baton Rouge and then at the Administrative Information Systems Department of Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.

Regina received her M.A. in Speech Communication at Louisiana State University in May 1988. During her study for the Doctor of Philosophy degree, she taught communication competence to international graduate

students as a teaching assistant in the Interdepartmental Program of Linguistics. She also held a teaching assistantship in the Department of Speech Communication where she taught public speaking and interpersonal communication. During the 1992-1993 academic year, she served as administrative and editorial assistant to Dr. Andrew King, chair of the Department of Speech Communication and editor of Southern Communication Journal.

DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

Candidate: Regina M. Hoffman

Major Field: Speech Communication

Title of Dissertation: Disclosure Decisions and Patterns after a Near-Death Experience

Approved:

J. Donald Ragsdale
Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

Date of Examination:

March 10, 1993